

The Tardy Cannon Ball

(Continued from Page 7)

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was way out there with nothing but sheep to look at.

"Dink had been mostly a grouchy, roving sort of cuss; but now he began to figure that that valley was good enough for him until Kingdom Come. Why, he'd get out there with them sheep and actually sing. The sheep hardly knew him, he was so changed. Ol' Floss used to come over from his camp about three times a week and stuff himself full of corn-bread and hot cakes. They even got some chickens, and had eggs and fries, too, sometimes.

"She was most too nice for that kind of life. You know what I mean. But she didn't seem to think so, and she was more to them two herders than sunshine and rain. Luck seemed to trail her, too. There wasn't a single disease hit the sheep in two years, and prices held so steady that Dink bought a lot of stuff for her in town that looked right funny in that log shack.

"JESS had pretty little ways, and when she'd laugh, a man would carry the sound of it for a whole day. It wasn't like a grown-up woman's laugh at all. It sounded more like a child playing. They used to see which could make her laugh most, them two. And if ol' Dink ever began to look serious, she'd coax him and stroke his hair."

The agent had his shade down over his eyes and was cutting notches in the arm of the chair with a penknife. He evinced some impatience over the windiness of this tribute. The other was not disturbed thereby.

"Well, things moved along and Floss kept a-coming over three or four times every week. Often the three of 'em would joke about getting a wife for Floss, and he'd say that she had to be a twin to Jess or back she'd go by the next burro express. Then they'd all laugh.

"One evening, Dink came in from following some strays. Mighty tired he was, and he said something about the rain holding off.

"'Oh,' she broke out, 'why can't you talk about something else? I never hear a word but rain and grass and sick sheep.'

"He just looked at her, for he was knocked so cold he couldn't think. It was the first time Jess had ever got real mad. Of course, they'd had a spat now and again—you know how it is with married folks; everybody has 'em—but they always blown over quick, and her and Dink were lovin'g than ever. But now, when Dink tried to smooth her down, she got awful fretful and tore loose and walked the floor, just eyeing of him. When he kept on explaining, she run inside her room and called to him through the door, for heaven's sake, to leave her be.

"After that, nothing he did seemed to satisfy Jess. She would get mad at him, no matter what he done. It seemed to worry her just to have him round. Then again, she would have fits of crying, and if he didn't get up and sneak off, she would go pretty near crazy.

"She took to finding fault, too, with the way Dink dressed. Heaven knows there was reason enough—a shepherd can't put on a fresh-boiled shirt every day to tramp around on top of a hill. But, before this, she'd never noticed what he wore. Why, when Gober first set eyes on her up in Capitan, he had on a pair of overalls that were scandalous, and even Floss had advised him to change his shirt.

"'Mr. Campbell, he don't go round looking dirty all the time,' Jess says to him once.

"'Mr. Campbell? Do you mean ol' Floss?'

"'Who else could I mean?' she says. It was the first time she'd ever called Floss 'Mr.' Gober figured she'd got it in for him, too.

"Dink, he stood the nagging and the coldness for quite a spell. Then he took to spending more time with his flocks, and the more he thought over it, the worse he felt. There's some men who can carry this sort of trouble and come through all the better, but Dink, he

didn't have enough of the stern stuff in him. For pretty soon he got into a way of buying bottles of mescal from the natives who were cutting wood in them mountains."

The agent appeared to be dozing over the recital. In the pause, he yawned.

"YES?" he said wearily. "You were saying as Dink hit 'er up pretty lively?"

"He did and he didn't," was the careful reply. "It did happen now and again that Gober would go sniggering to himself out there on a hill, along of the sheep being so stupid. But mostly he kept a good grip on himself. However, it wasn't no use. Every day they seemed to get farther apart. They were just like that!"—the traveler made a cross of two fingers—"Once, when Floss was over to see about a shovel he needed to patch a waterhole, Dink told him all about it and asked what in thunder he'd ought to do. Floss shook his head—that was n't much in his line, because ol' Floss had never been any hand with women—and pretty soon he got up and dragged it back to camp.

"It came fall, and one day he threw a pack-saddle on a burro and clumb up the hills to Capitan. It was beautiful weather—sunshiny, not too hot; only about eighty, which is easy for them altitudes—and the clouds was trailing in long wisps all around the middle of the mountains. In one place they lifted and bunched around a peak, and you could see, miles off, a regular veil swaying between them and the ground. It was sure one fine rain and Dink was some pleased, because it was over a stretch of country where one of his flocks was grazing.

"Well, Gober went along, thinking of his sheep and of Jess, and whacking the burro good when he needed it. He got to the village at night, and had a drink or two, and bought what he went for. Then early next morning he ate his breakfast, said 'No' to some fellers he knew, and set out for home, driving the burro ahead.

"It was a bright, awful pretty day, October, it was, and the whole country was sleek. Dink had n't ever felt better. The air was fine, and he kept a-singing. It was a song he'd learned back in Louisiana.

It's out on the road with a very heavy load,

With a mighty awkward team and an awful muddy road;

You may whip and you may holler, but if you cuss, it's on the sky.

Then whack the cattle on, boys—root, hog, or die.

"My voice ain't much. That high note didn't sound very good to me, did it to you? But you know that ol' song—the Bull Whacker, they call it. Dink was awful fond of that song.

"Somehow or other, aloft in them mountains, with a breeze blowing, Dink couldn't get it into his head that everything would n't come right. It would just have to. Jess would be like she used to be, and they'd set outside in the dusk again, close up on the bench, and figure on the sort of house they'd have when their ship came in and there was a flock of little Dinks to make it lively. So he walloped the burro and went down the steep trail at most a run. Dink aimed to sneak up to the shack and slip in on Jess and get her around the waist and show her the present he'd brought, before she could open up on him. You see, ol' Gober reasoned that if he could ever take her by surprise that way, they'd get back to the point where they'd left off. But I reckon that when it starts to die, it's going to die—don't you? Love, I mean.

"Dink stole in, all right. There was n't nobody to stop him. He went all through the shack, a-holding that present, very foolish, in his hand. It was a red silk Mexican shawl, which he had paid seven dollars gold for, and Dink thought it would go wonderful well with her hair. Twice he called 'Jess,' although he could see plain she was n't there; then he ran out and up to the spring. It was as quiet there as in the

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