



Sally Oldfield walked between the Doc and the sheriff, linking her arms in theirs

DOC SWAP HIRES A HAND

By BEN FRANK

Utterly Useless is his name, but Old Doc Swap's weary helper proves plumb useful when tradin' hits a snag!

OLD Doc Swap, fat hands in the pockets of his baggy pants, a deep scowl wrapped around his whiskery face, stood with his back against Cy Pulley's red and white barber pole. Some place down inside his oversized middle, he had a lonely, lost feeling.

"Wouldn't care if that ole fool sheriff busted a arm," he growled.

From behind the jail came the clang of a horseshoe against an iron stake, and Doc's scowl deepened.

"Wouldn't care if he busted both arms," he amended.

From now on until after the Dry Bluffs horseshoe pitching championship was settled for another year, Doc reckoned life wouldn't be worth shucks, for Sheriff MacLoyd, gearing himself for the championship game, wouldn't have time to do any swapping.

For forty years, Doc and the sheriff of Bluff County had been bitter rivals in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart—

fiddle playing and swapping. Now, with MacLoyd out of the swapping picture for at least another week, life held little interest for Doc.

Doc himself didn't care a hoot for the game. There were two reasons for this. One, he couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a horseshoe. Two, he was built wrong for stooping to pick up horseshoes. But Sheriff MacLoyd, who was built on the same pattern as a rake handle, had been Dry Bluffs champion for twenty years. And he intended to keep on being champion as long as he could lift a horseshoe.

The old swapper tuned his ears for another disheartening clang of steel. It didn't come, and his scowl turned to a look of puzzlement. Tightening his fancy Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered it a highlight in his swapping career—over his bald head, he waddled across the narrow, dusty street toward the sun-warped, cracker-box jail. Something mighty unordinary, he knew, must have happened to break into Sheriff MacLoyd's practise. And Doc never liked to miss out on anything out of the ordinary. Especially when it concerned his old friendly-enemy, the sheriff.

He puffed around the corner of the jail and came to a dead halt. A youngish man with a sad, pale face and dressed in a much abused and wrinkled green-checked store suit, lay sprawled in the shade of a lone cottonwood. Within two feet of his uncombed shock of bright orange hair, stood a one of MacLoyd's horseshoe stakes.

MACLOYD, his bony face as red as his new, flaming silk shirt, towered over the young man.

"Yuh can't lay there!" the sheriff bellowed.

"This is the only tree shade I've saw fer a week." The young man yawned. "Why can't I lay here?"

"It ain't safe," MacLoyd answered. "I might brain yuh with a hoss-shoe."

"A good player wouldn't," the young man answered without opening his eyes.

Doc smiled happily and edged closer. Nothing he liked better than seeing MacLoyd riled to the point of exploding.

"I'd like yuh to know that I am the champeen of Bluff County, young feller!" the sheriff roared.

"Reckon it's safe here, then," the young man murmured.

"Nope," Doc said. "I reckon it ain't. That ole buzzard like as not will let one slip and bust yore head in."

MacLoyd stiffened with a jerk and turned on his bony, bowed legs. His thin lips puckered, and he sent an angry, hissing stream of tobacco juice halfway across the court house lawn.

"Lissen, yuh fat, mouthy ole maverick," he exploded, "yuh stay outa this! Yuh—"

"Oh, there you are," a sweet, feminine voice cooed.

Both Doc and the sheriff immediately lost their scowls, and smiled. The young man opened one eye, took a look at the vision of loveliness that had come around the corner of the jail, opened the other eye and sat up.

The girl, Sally Oldfield, linked her smooth, white arms with Doc's fat right and the sheriff's skinny left and gave each in turn a red-lipped smile.

"I'm so glad I found you two old dears together," she said. "You know, the professor and I are being married week after next, and we're giving a big wedding dance in the evening. I want one of you to play for the dance."

MacLoyd gulped. "Which one?"

"Oh." Sally smiled. "It really doesn't

matter. I'll let you two decide that."

She unlinked her arms, gave her golden head a toss and started on her way.

"Thanks so much," she called back. "I'll be counting on one of you."

The young man sank back to the ground and closed his eyes.

"Just my luck," he said sadly. "Them kind is allus took before I see 'em."

Neither Doc nor the sheriff heard him. They were eying each other with hostility.

"Reckon I better do the fiddlin'," MacLoyd said. "Yuh ain't so good."

"Who ain't so good?" Doc fumed. "Why, yuh second cousin to a snake, I can play rings around—"

"Who's the professor?" the young man interrupted.

"Professor John Paul Jones Stuenkal from the East," Doc answered. "He comes here ever' year to study rocks." He turned back to the sheriff. "I'll do the playin', and they ain't no use'n yuh objectin'."

"I'll tell yuh what," MacLoyd said, "I'll flip yuh this half-dollar to see who plays for the dance."

Doc felt a tingle of mistrust. MacLoyd was as good with a flipped coin as he was with a pair of horseshoes. Besides there was a finality about a flipped coin that Doc's bargaining nature disapproved of heartily.

"Mebbe," he said quickly, "we could fix us up some kind of a swap to see who'll do the fiddlin'?"

MacLoyd's pale eyes narrowed. "Ain't got no time for swappin'," he said. "Besides yuh ain't got nothin' worth havin' outside youre red-gold fiddle."

Doc shuddered. For years MacLoyd had been trying to get Doc's beloved fiddle. Besides, if he swapped it to the sheriff, he wouldn't have anything to play on for the dance. Obviously, MacLoyd was setting a trap, and Doc felt a trickle of sweat run down toward his left eye.

"Let's don't get in no hurry about decidin' who's goin' to do the fiddlin'," he said cautiously. "Why, one of us might up and bust a arm before then."

THE suspicion on MacLoyd's thin face doubled.

"Doc," he said, picking up the horseshoes, "don't yuh try nothin' funny, like bustin' one of my arms, or I'll lock yuh up."

"Phooey!" Doc snorted. "If I was goin' to bust any part of yuh, it'd be yore thick head!"

The young man broke into the harangue with a loud but musical snore. MacLoyd cussed and gouged him awake with the toe of his number twelve boot. The young man sighed and opened one eye.

"Get up and get out!" MacLoyd said. "I gotta practise my hoss-shoe pitchin'."

"Used to play some hoss-shoes myself," the young man said without interest. "Too much movin' around, so I give it up. Took up mumblety-peg, only I lost my knife. Now, I do card tricks. Want to see one?"

"Ain't got no time fer card tricks," MacLoyd said. "Scat!"

The young man shook his orange head and closed the eye.

"Kinda like this shade," he said. "Reckon this is a public place, and it's a free country."

A crafty look came into MacLoyd's bony face. "Who yuh workin' for?" he asked.

"Ain't workin'," came the answer.

"Vagrancy is ag'in the law in Dry Bluffs," the sheriff said triumphantly. "Yuh can take yore choice of gettin' out of town, or thirty days in jail."

That brought the young man to a sitting position, and a look of deep sorrow filled his pale face.

"I shore hate to move," he murmured, "but I ain't one who goes much for jail life."

Doc, an innocent smile on his round, whiskery face, laid a fat hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Son," he said kindly, "I'll give yuh a job so's yuh won't be a vagrant. From now on yuh're my hired hand!"

The young man looked a little frightened.

"I ain't much of a hand to work," he said.

"Don't let it worry yuh," Doc said blandly. "Yore job is just layin' here under this shade tree."

The young man shuddered.

"I don't hanker to lay under this tree now that it's work," he said. "Besides, since yuh're my new boss, I reckon yuh've got to feed me. And I ain't et for some time."

MacLoyd stepped forward, spat maliciously and grinned.

"Doc, yuh've hired yoreself a hand," he said. "Now it's up to you to keep him well fed. If I hear of you mistreatin' yore help in any way, I'll likely have to lock yuh up for assault and battery, or cruelty."

Doc blinked rapidly and reckoned that he was being took. Nothing would please the sheriff more than to settle the dance playing dispute by locking Doc up on some trumped-up pretext. Anger stirred up through the old swapper, and he felt his face growing red.

"Why, yuh dad-blasted ole faker," he yipped, "yuh can't do nothin' of the kind. Yuh—yuh—"

MacLoyd chuckled wickedly. "Heh, heh! Can't I!"

Doc drew a deep breath and got back his voice.

"Yuh'll regret this!" he bellowed at the sheriff. "Not only will I play fer the dance

and make yuh like it, but I'll swap that fancy red shirt right off yore skinny back!"

MacLoyd laughed so hard he choked on his cud of tobacco.

"Big talk," he sputtered. "Mighty windy talk, too."

Doc crammed his fancy Stetson down to his ears and turned toward the street.

"Come on," he said to his new hired man.

Old Doc Swap learned three things about his new man before noon. First, he went by the name of Useless Utterly. Second, he had an unlimited capacity for food. Third, he wasn't afraid of work—he could lie down beside it and go peacefully to sleep.

Cussing into his ragged whiskers, Doc watched Useless start to curry his sleek bays and fall asleep with his back propped against the manger.

Doc reckoned then that it was time to figure out some way of getting rid of the young man. Also, Doc had another problem to work out—swapping MacLoyd out of playing for Sally Oldfield's dance and getting the sheriff's red silk shirt to boot.

WHENEVER Doc had a problem to solve, there was just one thing for him to do—go to Sugar Valley on a swappin' spree. Nesters were beginning to settle up the valley, and nesters were swappers. Doc could do his best thinking when trading. So he harnessed up his covered wagon, aroused Useless long enough to get him into the wagon, and headed for Sugar Valley.

Doc made his first stop at Add Trotter's homestead.

Add, who liked to sit in his rocking chair and play solitaire, was sitting in the shade of an unhappy oak. Add lifted his leathery face.

“ ’Lo, Doc,” he greeted Doc sadly. “Light awhile. But don’t try to do no swappin’. I ain’t in a mood for it.”

Doc climbed to the ground, followed by Useless Utterly.

“What’s got yuh down, Add?” Doc asked cheerfully.

Add sighed. “Got my playin’ cards mixed up with some ole newspapers an’ started a fire with ‘em. Now I ain’t got no way amusin’ myself except by goin’ fishin’.”

Useless opened one eye.

“Speakin’ of cards,” he murmured, dragging out a ragged deck of cards, “I do card tricks. Ever see this here trick about—”

Add’s eyes fixed hungrily on the deck of cards.

“Give yuh fifty cents for them cards, feller,” he said.

“He ain’t sellin’ ’em,” Doc snapped.

“Now, Doc!” Useless protested.

“I’m yore boss,” Doc said firmly. “You do as I say, or I’ll fire yuh, and the sheriff’ll give yuh thirty days fer vagrancy!” Doc smiled blandly at Add. “Useless, howsomeever, might do some swappin.’—”

When Doc drove away from Add Trotter’s, Useless was minus the cards, but Doc had an old cow bell, a wooden water bucket, a weed hook, and a can of fish worms to-boot. He hadn’t had any trouble getting Add to throw the worms in, for Add reckoned he’d rather stay in his rocking chair and play solitaire than go fishing any day.

Useless found energy enough to sit with Doc on the sagging spring seat. When they reached Doc’s favorite camping ground on the bank of Sugar Creek, the young man eyed the placid water with some show of interest.

“Used to fish ’fore I took up card tricks,” he murmured. “Kinda wish I had

some fishin’ tackle, now that we got us some worms.”

They rounded a clump of willows and came upon old Cy Oldfield, his daughter Sally and her future husband, Professor John Paul Jones Stuenkal. Lying scattered about the Oldfield springwagon lay a collection of fishing poles and tackle.

Doc saw right off that there was some tension among the three. Cy Oldfield’s face wore a look of supreme disgust. Sally seemed unhappy, and the tall, thin professor appeared to be considerably fussed.

“Fine evenin’ fer fishin’,” Doc observed cheerfully.

“It would be,” Cy put in tartly, “if John Paul Jones hadn’t forgot to put in the bait.”

The professor ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

“I was engrossed in a fossil at the time,” he said. “The bait slipped my mind.”

“He ain’t got no mind,” Cy said under his breath.

Sally came to the professor’s rescue. “Oh, Doc, have you decided who’s going to play for the wedding dance?”

“Me,” Doc answered. “Ain’t no doubt about that.”

Useless sighed and opened both eyes.

“We got us some worms, but no fish tackle,” he murmured.

Five minutes later, the Oldfield party was happily fishing with half a can of worms, for which they had given Doc a share of their picnic lunch, a fishing pole and an old, broken buggy axle to-boot. Doc was a great hand for boot.

USELESS picked up the newly acquired fishing pole and started for the creek. Halfway there, he got tired, lay down on the grass and went to sleep.

Cussing into his whiskers, Doc went on to the creek and caught enough sun-

perch for breakfast. When he came back to the wagon, he found Useless there ahead of him, finishing the last of the picnic lunch.

“Shore is good, Doc,” Useless grinned. “Figured I had it comin’ to me, seein’ as how yuh swapped off my cards.”

Doc didn’t say anything. He just cussed some more and reckoned that if he didn’t devise a way of getting rid of his hired hand pronto, likely as not the long, hollow jasper would start eating the harness off the bays.

The next morning, the sun came up like a flame, and the usual south breeze died down to nothing.

Useless shuddered and crawled under the canvas of the old covered wagon.

“Ain’t no fit day for a human to be outside,” he said. “A feller’d likely get sunstroke.”

Doc climbed up on the spring seat and headed the bays down Sugar Creek Trail. Never before had he met anyone as lazy as his hired man. In fact, if it hadn’t been for furnishing him with food and for the worry about who was going to play for Sally’s wedding dance, Doc would have enjoyed having Useless around just to hear him snore. He had such a happy, musical snore.

A rider came around the covered wagon and pulled a willing and sad looking buckskin to a stop. He was Ham Brady, one of MacLoyd’s occasional deputies. He trapped in winters and loafed in summers and chewed finecut with the same relish that a hog eats corn.

“Hotter’n seven kinds of Hades,” Ham observed. “And with me havin’ to ride over to Red Dog to see about a fight a couple of jaspers had!”

Useless poked his orange head out from under the canvas.

“Fight?” He blinked. “Had a fight myself oncet. Over a hoss-shoe game.

Seems as though—”

“Hoss shoes!” Ham unloaded an explosive cud. The tail of his squirrel-skin cap—Ham wore the cap all the time—got into his eyes, and he brushed it away with a brisk cuss word. “The next time I hear anybody say anything about hoss-shoes, I’m goin’ to shoot him!”

“What’s the matter with hoss-shoes?” Doc asked mildly.

“If old MacLoyd wasn’t so busy practisin’ for the championship, he could of gone hisself to Red Dog,” Ham explained. “But no, he sends me! What I ought to do is crawl off under a shade tree along the crick and fish. Only I ain’t got no tackle.”

“We got us some tackle,” Useless murmured. “Might sell it.”

“Ain’t fer sale,” Doc snapped. “Might swap, though.”

“Now, Doc!” Useless protested. “Don’t yuh ever have no hankerin’ for money?”

Doc didn’t have. He was a swapper, not a salesman. He ignored his sad-faced hired man and began to talk swap to Ham.

For the fishing tackle, Doc got an old shotgun with a broken spring, a pocket knife and a pair of green dice to-boot.

Useless brightened when he saw the dice.

“Used to be right handy with them things,” he said. “That was ‘fore I took up hoss-shoe pitchin’.”

Ham cussed with eloquence at the word “horse-shoe” and headed his buckskin toward Sugar Creek.

Useless took the dice in his oversized paw and studied them critically.

“’Course,” he went on, “these here’d take a little fixin’ ’fore they’d come up seven ever’ time, but—Doc, how about loanin’ me yore new knife.”

Doc lent him the knife and drove on along the trail. Useless retired to the

canvas shade and began to work on the dice with the knife.

A mile farther on, Doc turned in at Mule Turner's place. Ida, Mule's husky spouse, was down on bended knees, pulling weeds from around the rusty yard fence. Mule stood nearby, offering advice but no help.

Doc swept off his fancy hat and bowed.

"You folks is really makin' things look lovely," he said.

Mule looked pleased. "That's what I told Ida."

Ida looked up. Sweat streaked her ruddy face, and there was an angry glint in her eyes.

"Pullin' weeds ain't no picnic!" she panted. "Cuttin' 'em would be a sight easier and quicker."

"Ain't got no cutter, though," Mule added.

Slowly Useless lifted his sad eyes from the green dice and fished out the weed-hook from among Doc's swappin' goods.

"Got this here cutter, but Doc won't sell it."

Doc smiled happily. Useless was catching on fast.

"Might do some swappin', howsomeever," he offered.

When Doc drove away from the Turners', he was without a weed-hook, but in its place, he had a loaf of Ida's homemade bread, a can of watermelon preserves, a ball of twine, and five shotgun shells to-boot. Even if Doc's shotgun wouldn't shoot, he hadn't been able to resist talking Mule into throwing the shells in to-boot.

The wheels of the covered wagon had hardly got settled into the deep, dusty ruts of the Sugar Creek Trail when Sheriff MacLoyd came driving up in his topless buggy, one big foot dangling on the

outside, a milk-curdling scowl on his bony face.

Doc didn't miss the scowl. Just seeing it made him forget the heat and feel happy.

"Fine day to be out in the country," he said. "On a nice, sunny day like this, a feller can see for miles—"

"Ain't out seein'," MacLoyd cut in darkly. "Out on official business. Somebody stole some chickens from ole man Dixon, an' I got to go investigate."

"Too bad," Doc sighed. "Kind of cuts in on yore hoss-shoe practise, don't it?"

The sheriff flexed his right arm and looked worried.

"Doc," he admitted, "I'm shore jittery about my game this year. Seems like I'm gettin' muscle bound."

Doc felt his happiness increase, and a tingle of anticipation ran through him as an idea for a swap leaped into his mind. But his round face remained as innocent as a baby's.

"What yuh need is to relax," he said soberly. "Useless hand me that shotgun and them shells."

Useless sighed and cast a longing glance at the loaf of bread and the watermelon preserves, which Doc wisely had put where he could keep an eye on them.

"I'm almost too weak to lift that gun," he said.

But in spite of his professed weakness, he handed it and the shells to Doc.

The old swapper beamed on MacLoyd.

"Ain't nothin' like a little huntin' to relax a man."

"That's right," Useless chimed in. "Remember once when I was about to get in a hoss-shoe game. Was all tied up in knots. Went huntin' and when I come back, never played so good a game in all my life."

MacLoyd was impressed.

“Might get me a few jackrabbits on the way home,” he conceded.

“Make yuh as fit as a fiddle,” Useless declared, closing his eyes. “Course, Doc ain’t got no business ability, so yuh’ll have to swap him for the gun.”

The word “fiddle” made MacLoyd and Doc exchange dagger glances, but neither mentioned the coming wedding dance.

Immediately, the two old cronies got into a bitter wrangle over the terms of the trade, and argued loudly and profanely to the accompaniment of Useless Utterly’s gentle, musical snores. Doc tried to get the sheriff’s red silk shirt in the deal, but MacLoyd threatened to leave before the swap came to a head.

But Doc couldn’t let him do that. To Doc, missing a swap with MacLoyd, and maybe beating him a little to-boot, would be a blight on his reputation for years to come.

At last the sheriff drove away with the gun and the shells. Doc had a humped-back buggy whip, a gallon water jug, a fancy box of matches, a worn out pair of overshoes, and a moth-eaten lap robe to-boot. And a big smile on his whiskery face.

He’d forgotten to mention the fact that the gun wouldn’t shoot, and the sheriff hadn’t found it out—yet.

Useless shook his orange head sadly and stared at accumulation of “swappin’” goods.

“Beats all, Doc, what yuh’ve got fer that deck of cards,” he said. “A cowbell, water bucket, busted buggy axle, pocket knife, a ball of twine, buggy whip, jug, overshoes, some right purty matches, a lap robe, and some grub what I could eat right now. But if yuh’d let me handle things, we’d have had us some cash money.”

“What’d anybody want money for?” Doc asked crossly.

“Why, I allus had a hankerin’ to take a

train ride,” Useless sighed. “But it takes cash money to buy a ticket.”

“Phooey!” Doc grunted, and stared glumly straight ahead.

EVEN if he had done right well with the deck of cards, he was far from satisfied. His two problems—how to win over MacLoyd concerning the wedding dance and get the sheriff’s shirt to-boot, and how to rid himself gracefully of his always-hungry hired man—remained unsolved.

Doc shuddered and swung the sleek bays to the right and up Bill Clink’s tumbled-down shack. The water jug had made him think of Bill, not that Bill would likely be interested in water. But he might have a use for the jug, for Bill was a great hand for the kind of liquid refreshments that made him see things.

Doc climbed from the wagon with the jug snug under his fat arm. Useless followed with the moth-eaten lap robe over his shoulder and spread it out in the shade of Bill’s shack. There was a faint gleam of excitement in his eyes, and the green dice cackled in his big fist.

Bill Clink came to the door and stood there on bare feet, eying Doc and the jug without interest.

Doc swept off his fancy hat and fanned his sweating face.

“Picked up just what yuh need,” he said, holding out the jug. “Says I to myself, ‘Bill’ll shore want this jug.’ So I hung onto it, even if a lot of fellers did try to trade for—”

Bill wiggled his toes and shook his shaggy head.

“Ain’t got no need fer it no more, Doc,” he said sadly. “I’m strictly on the waterwagon now.”

Doc stared unbelievably.

“Doc,” Bill went on with a slight shudder, “when a man’s house sprouts

wings and starts flyin' around like a bird, it's time he switched to water."

His voice trailed off, and his bleary eyes came to a focus on an object at the side of his shack. Doc turned and saw Useless on his knees at the edge of the lap robe. The young man's big hand moved, and two green cubes leaped forth and rolled across the lap robe.

Useless' pale face wore a satisfied smile.

"Seven any way yuh throw 'em," he murmured.

Bill shuffled to the edge of the lap robe, picked up the dice and gave them a whirl. A four and a three stared him in the face. He beamed on Useless.

"How much yuh take fer 'em, young feller?" he asked.

Useless lost his smile, and a deep sigh escaped him. He lifted his eyes to Doc's round face and shook his head.

"Yuh'll have to dicker with my boss," he said sadly.

Bill Clink soon became the proud owner of a pair of crooked dice. In exchange, Doc got an old buggy wheel, two live chickens, a ragged shirt, and a pair of old rusty horseshoes to-boot. The shoes were too large for Doc's bays, but a trade wouldn't be a trade without something to-boot.

Useless hefted the horseshoes and shook his orange head.

"A mite heavier'n regulation hoss-shoes," he said, and tossed them into the wagon.

Then he turned his eyes on the two chickens, and his face lighted up like a moonlit sky.

"Allus had a hankerin' for fried chicken," he murmured.

Doc sighed. He reckoned those two chickens didn't have a Chinaman's chance to see the light of another day.

The old swapper and his hired man climbed into the covered wagon and headed back toward Sugar Creek. In camp late that afternoon, Useless, for the first time, showed a spark of energy. He dressed and cleaned the two chickens, while Doc got the campfire going.

After they'd eaten, Useless looked sadly about.

"Allus liked to play games after a good fillin' meal," he said. "But yuh swapped off my cards and my dice. Looks like I'm in for a time-draggin' evenin', unless yuh loan me that pocket knife, Doc."

Doc fished out the knife and handed it over.

Useless selected a spongy spot of ground and began a game of mumblety-peg. The low sun made his orange hair look like a brush fire. Doc, watching him, suddenly realized that his hired man was a wizard with the knife. He could make it do everything but talk. Vaguely he wondered if Useless was as good at playing other games as he was at this one.

Right in the middle of the game, two rannies from the Double O rode up in a cloud of dust.

The tall, skinny cowboy slid to the ground and stared at Useless' flashing knife.

"Been wantin' a knife like that for a long time," he said.

Useless sighed and stopped playing.

"Take a dollar for it," he whispered hoarsely.

But Doc heard him and leaped to his feet.

"That's my knife, an' it ain't fer sale!" he bellowed.

"Aw, Doc!" Useless protested, "Ain't I ever goin' to get no cash money so's I can take a train ride?"

Doc ignored him and turned to the skinny cowboy.

"We might figure us out a swap," he

said blandly.

For the knife, Doc got an old lariat and a mouth harp to-boot.

The second cowboy, a five-by-five type, had been eying the water jug with interest.

“Wild grapes along Sugar Creek is gettin’ ripe,” he muttered. “My grandpappy used to have a jug like that, Doc. Seems he used to fill it with wild grapes and let it set awhile.”

“Yuh’d have to put sugar with ‘em,” Doc said without apparent interest. “About six weeks later, yuh’d be surprised at what yuh could pour out of a jug like that.”

FIVE-BY-FIVE slid heavily to the ground and ran fat caressing fingers over the jug.

“Reckon yuh wouldn’t take two-bits for it?”

Useless got to his feet and brushed off the knees of his green-checked suit.

“Can’t buy no train ticket for two-bits,” he said scornfully.

“Fifty cents?” Five-by-five offered.

“Ain’t for sale,” Doc snapped.

For the jug, Doc got a battered hammer and a sack of fence staples.

The rannies rode on, and Useless wandered unhappily about the covered wagon. “Doc,” he said. “Yuh’re a hard man. Fust, yuh swap off my cards. And then my dice. And now, that pocket knife. Looks like I ain’t got a thing to entertain myself with unless—”

He reached into the wagon and pulled out a piece of the broken buggy axle, picked up the hammer and drove the axle into the ground. After this, he fumbled around among the “swappin’” goods until he found the two rusty horseshoes, the ball of twine and the fancy box of matches.

Curious but silent, Doc watched him. Useless tied a match to the iron stake with the twine, backed away some fifteen steps,

shut one eye, took aim and tossed one of the rusty horseshoes. It fell a trifle short.

“A mite heavy,” Useless murmured.

The next throw was perfect. The shoe raked across the head of the match, bringing forth a bright flame.

Doc leaped to his feet.

“Reckon yuh couldn’t do that again,” he wheezed.

Useless dropped to the ground and closed his eyes.

“Reckon I could,” he said without enthusiasm, “if someone was to tie another match on that stake and bring them shoes to me. Worked with a carnival once, and used to light matches that way all the time. Also, used to throw twenty-four ringers outa twenty-five tries. ‘Course, I could have throwed twenty-five outa twenty-five. But it looks harder if yuh miss now and then. But hoss-shoe pitchin’ ain’t no fun, Doc. A feller has to move around too much.”

Doc wiped his shiny bald head and grinned. He reckoned he plain downright loved his hired man. In fact, if it wasn’t for Useless’ appetite, Doc would have made a life-long contract with him right then and there.

But remembering the appetite, he merely said: “Reckon we oughta be headin’ for Dry Bluffs. Got a little work for yuh to do, Useless.”

Mid-morning found old Doc Swap and Sheriff MacLoyd walking hurriedly along Dry Bluff’s one street, toward Doc’s neat little cottage at the edge of town.

MacLoyd’s face wore a look of mistrust, and he swore under his breath at every tenth step.

“Lis’en, yuh ole crook, why don’t yuh tell me what yuh got to show me?” he kept asking.

“Yuh wouldn’t believe me,” was Doc’s only answer.

They came to the cottage and went in.

Doc led the way to a back window, and MacLoyd peered cautiously through it.

“Don’t see nothin’ but that fool hired man of yourn, sleepin’ under a tree,” he said.

Doc’s fat hand reached up and wrapped around a length of twine. The twine ran through the window, over a limb of the tree under which Useless Utterly snored, and was attached to the cowbell, a device which Doc had wisely rigged up before going after the sheriff.

The old swapper yanked on the string, and the bell clanged. Useless yawned, got to his feet, looked unhappily toward the house and picked up two rusty horseshoes.

Slowly he shut one eye, and his long arm swung forward. The shoe landed with a dull thud at the other side of the back yard and neatly hugged a buggy axle stake. Useless put the other shoe squarely on top of the first, and with a look of distinct distaste on his sad, pale face, crossed the yard, picked up the shoes and repeated the performance.

Doc glanced slyly at Sheriff MacLoyd. The man’s bony jaw sagged, and his pale eyes reminded Doc of two glass doorknobs.

“Figurin’ some on enterin’ my hired hand in the hoss-shoe pitchin’ contest,” Doc said blandly. “He can even light matches with them shoes.”

From outside came another dull thud, followed by a clang of steel on steel.

MacLoyd sank weakly into a chair. His face was white. “Okay, Doc,” he wheezed. “Yuh win! What’s yore price?”

Doc looked deeply hurt. “Why,” he said, “I ain’t got no price. Might swap, though. Reckon if I was to play at Sally’s weddin’, and yuh was to buy Useless a one-way railroad ticket, and was to swap yore purty red shirt to-boot for this ole one I got from Bill Clink, we might make a deal.”

MacLoyd began to unbutton his red silk shirt. Through the window came a gentle, musical snore.

Doc smiled happily and handed the old shirt to the sheriff. He reckoned he’d miss that snoring. But he guessed life was worthwhile, anyway, even if about everybody in Dry Bluffs was busy practising up for the horseshoe championship. Especially worthwhile when you had a big wedding dance to fiddle for and a beautiful red-gold fiddle to do the fiddlin’ on.