



## DOC SWAP'S BELL RINGER BUST

By BEN FRANK

*The tradin' hombre includes a shattered romance, a coveted cowbell and the general's lost head in his swappin' bag!*

**O**LD DOC SWAP stood in the middle of the front room of his neat little cottage at the edge of Dry Bluffs, doing some fancy cussing into his ragged white whiskers.

"Dad-blastedest town a feller ever got stuck in!" he mumbled. "Might as well be in a six-by-three hole up in Boot Hill as livin' in a place like this!" He snugged his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a windblown old horse for the hat and considered the trade one of the highlights

of his swapping career—down over his shiny bald head. His keen blue eyes wandered about the room for one last look.

Everything was in order. His red-gold fiddle in its wooden case stood in the corner. The easy chair faced the native-rock fireplace. His collection of famous cowbells shone like gold on the mantel.

With a snort and one last cuss-word, the old swapper hooked his fat fingers around the handle of a badly battered suitcase and waddled through the front

door. Outside, the sun was warm and bright, the air sweet and clean. He shut the door with an angry slam.

The fact was, life had suddenly gone stale for old Doc Swap. Sheriff MacLoyd, Doc's old crony and bitterest rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart—swappin' and fiddle playin'—had grown so friendly and agreeable in the last few weeks that there was absolutely no point in working up a trade with him. So Doc was bored stiff. Unable to think of anything better, he'd decided to pay a long promised visit to his sister in the East. Even if he missed the Dry Bluffs Founders' Day Celebration and Rodeo.

Halfway along Dry Bluffs' one street, he saw the school kids come tumbling out of the schoolhouse. The teacher, Eva Zorn, stood in the doorway.

Eva smiled and waved.

"Have a nice time, Doc," she called.

She was as pretty as a store calendar—corn-silk hair, level gray eyes, and sensible. Doc waved back, thinking how Dry Bluffs would be looking for another teacher right soon, for Eva and Johnny Goodland were getting married in a month.

And then, he met Johnny Goodland.

Johnny worked at the Dry muff's Bank. A good kid, lean and brown and as hard as a rock in spite of his indoor work. He had a wide mouth and nice teeth and reddish hair that just wouldn't stay put no matter how much he combed it. Doc liked Johnny. Always had ever since he'd come to Dry Bluffs to work a couple of years ago.

"Lo, Johnny," he greeted.

**J**OHNNY jumped like he'd been stuck with a pin. He grinned halfway and said, "Hi, Doc," but he didn't stop and talk. He went right on as if he had a great worry in his mind that needed a lot of fresh air and exercise. And he didn't turn in at the schoolhouse. In fact, he didn't seem to see

Eva Zorn standing in the doorway.

Doc chewed at a tuft of whiskers and stared after him.

Johnny turned off at the corner, and Doc, frowning worriedly, went on his way. When he came to the sun-warped, cracker-box jail, he climbed the three wooden steps and crossed the rickety pine porch. He'd decided he ought to tell his friendly-enemy, old Sheriff MacLoyd, good-by. The door stood open, and Doc waddled into the two-by-four office. He slammed the screen door behind him.

Sheriff MacLoyd sat behind his spur-scarred desk. On the desk, reposed a wooden box. But it wasn't the box that made Doc grip the handle of his suitcase a mite tighter. It was the gleam in the sheriff's pale eyes. A "swappin' " gleam and one that Doc hadn't seen for quite a spell.

MacLoyd uncrossed his bony, bowed legs, leaned over the desk and with the careless efficiency of an expert, sent a stream of tobacco juice neatly through the open door.

"So yuh're leavin' fer a spell," he observed. "Even before the Founders' Day Celebration."

There was something in the bony sheriff's tone that sent a warning tingle through old Doc Swap.

"Mebbe," he answered cautiously. "Mebbe not."

"Got yore suitcase." MacLoyd's thin face wore a malicious grin. "Ain't packin' it around fer fun, I reckon."

"Well—" Doc began.

His voice choked off. His eyes had spied something on the top of a broken-down filing case that left his mouth hanging open. He understood now what was behind the gleam in MacLoyd's eyes. A battered but gleaming cowbell stood on the case.

Except for the tiny trickles of sweat that

began to work down his face and into his whiskers, Doc looked unperturbed.

"Purty, ain't it?" MacLoyd's thin lips curled wickedly beneath his handlebar mustache. "Look good with yore collection, I reckon?"

"Ain't interested in ordinary cowbells," Doc said.

"Ever hear of the Kingpin's lead steer, ole One-horn?"

Doc felt a trifle dizzy.

"Uh, huh," he managed.

"Thirteen times ole One-horn led the Kingpin herds from Texas to Dodge City. An' ever' time, ole One-horn wore that bell! Ain't no bell in yore collection got a history like that. Why, the time the Injuns snook up an'—"

"I bet it's a blasted fake!" stoutly.

But he knew better. He knew from bitter experience that whenever the sheriff got that certain gleam in his eyes and the triumphant look on his buzzard-beaked face, he wasn't bluffing. And right now, Doc knew MacLoyd had him across a barrel. The old swapper had been wanting the old Kingpin lead-steer bell for a long, long time.

Nevertheless, and against his better judgment, he crossed the room and looked closely at the bell. Sure enough, it bore the old Kingpin brand.

"Ain't got no more room on my mantel fer no more bells," Doc said carelessly. "Besides, I got all I want, anyway."

He glanced out of the corner of his eye at MacLoyd and knew he wasn't fooling anyone. Especially MacLoyd. But he went on in the same careless tone, anyway.

"What yuh got in that box?"

The sheriff pulled an oversized jackknife from a pocket and began to pry off the lid.

"Reckon it's the bust of ole Buffelroy that that Eastern artist-feller made," he answered. "The one that Deacon Plumb's

gonna unveil when he makes his Founders' Day speech. Me bein' chairman of the committee—"

"Glad I'm goin' away," Doc interrupted. "Won't have to listen to no longwinded—"

"Might do a little swappin' with that bell," MacLoyd murmured. "Never was no hand to collect things."

"Got a fresh Jersey," Doc said too quickly.

Instantly he realized his mistake. But the harm was done. The gleam was back in MacLoyd's eyes stronger than before.

The sheriff closed his jackknife with a snap.

"Ain't got no need fer no cow."

Doc sighed and cast a quick, hungry glance at the bell. It was finer than any of the lead-steer bells he owned, and the fact that the Kingpin's famous One-horn had worn it made it a collector's item worth a small fortune. Not that Doc was interested in fortunes. Doc was a swapper, not a buyer, and had little use for money. But the mere fact that the bell was in MacLoyd's possession was enough to make him want it. For forty years, he and MacLoyd had been trying to outswap each other. The feud was a deep and bitter one. He turned away as if he had lost all interest in the bell.

"Le's see ole Buffelroy's bust," he said.

**M**ACLOYD fished out the bust. It was of gleaming white marble, not quite life-sized, perched on a gold trimmed base with a heavy gold plate that bore the inscription:

GENERAL A. Z. BUFFELROY

FOUNDER OF DRY BLUFFS

"Right purty piece of marble," Doc observed, "only I reckon the general's face

don't beautify it none. Too big a nose."

"Right valuable, though," MacLoyd said. "I reckon them gold trimmin's is worth considerable. Must take it over an' let the deacon see it. He's spent a lot of time gettin' his speech fixed—"

"Might throw in a calf with that cow," Doc mumbled.

MacLoyd snorted and set the general's bust on the desk.

"Cows an' calves is as common as leaves on a tree. Howsome-ever, I sometimes think I'd like that fiddle of yourn."

Doc stiffened. For years, MacLoyd had been trying to get hold of Doc's beloved red-gold fiddle. He'd tried everything except plain outright theft, and it wouldn't have surprised Doc if the sheriff had tried that.

Doc glanced at the bell and shivered slightly. Part with his beloved fiddle? Never! But he sure had a hankering for that Kingpin cowbell.

"Of course," MacLoyd went on, adding insult to injury, "I'd expect a little to boot. Mebbe, that Jersey."

Doc's whiskers bristled, and his fat face turned a brick red. Not only did he resent the insult against his fiddle and his good swapping sense, but he also felt like a man who had been knocked down, then kicked in the face.

"Why, yuh dad-blamed, schemin'—"

Doc never could talk when he got too mad, and MacLoyd knew it. The sheriff rubbed the general's bald head and haw-hawed. Doc jammed his fancy Stetson down to his red ears and departed, not forgetting to give the door a window-rattling slam.

"Never knowed it to fail," Doc stormed. "Ever' time that mangy ole coyote gits somethin' I want, he tries to rob me. If I wasn't goin' away, I'd show—"

"Pardon me, mister," a throaty soprano

said, "but could you tell me where I can find Johnny Goodland?"

What Doc saw smiling at him made him forget his anger. The girl was tall and shapely, maybe a little hard-eyed, but mighty pretty in a way. Her blond hair shone like gold in the sun, and her cheeks and lips were as red as the sunny side of an apple. She carried a suitcase in one hand and a handbag in the other.

"Well," she said, her lips curling, "you ain't answered my question, grandpa."

Doc bristled. He didn't like being called grandpa.

"Johnny Goodland? Mebbe. Why?" he growled.

"I got business with Johnny," the girl answered.

Doc remembered the worried look in Johnny's eyes a few minutes before and wondered if this girl was the cause of it.

There was no point in not telling the girl where she'd find Johnny, because anyone in Dry Bluffs could tell her, so he said, "Johnny's at the bank, I reckon."

"A banker, huh?"

The girl's hard eyes brightened. She set the suitcase down, reached into her handbag, lifted out a thin package of letters and touched them to her red lips.

"Looks like little Susie's struck gold, mister!" she said. Then she lightly caught up her suitcase and, hips swinging, crossed the dusty street to the bank.

Then Doc remembered that it was after banking hours and that Johnny had undoubtedly gone to his rooming house. In the distance, the eastbound passenger whistled. Doc's fat face puckered.

Things were beginning to happen in Dry Bluffs. Things that he didn't want to miss, and right then he knew he wasn't going away on that train. Even if he had to listen to Deacon Plumb's speech about General Buffelroy. He turned and headed back home. On the way, he met Johnny

Goodland.

"Johnny," Doc asked, "yuh ever hear of a gal with gold hair an' the name of Susie?"

Johnny paled.

"No," he said hoarsely. But Johnny was a mighty poor liar.

"She's in town," Doc said, "an' askin' fer yuh."

"Shore, I know her," Johnny admitted unhappily. "Back in my home town when I was younger and a fool, I wrote her some letters. I got a letter from her just the other day. Said now that she had located me. She was comin' to see me."

"Wouldn't likely be wantin' yuh to buy them letters back, would she, Johnny?"

"She wants a thousand dollars for 'em," Johnny blurted, running his fingers through his wild, red hair. "Honest, Doc, I didn't mean a thing when I wrote those letters, but—"

"But they sound mighty meaningful," Doc finished for him. "Mebbe, they could make yuh lose yore job? Even lose Eva?"

Johnny didn't answer. He just stood there, looking at Doc out of sick eyes.

"I couldn't scare up a thousand dollars to save my soul," he said abruptly, turned and walked away.

Watching him, Doc suddenly realized that he had two problems on his hands—how to get the Kingpin cowbell and how to save Johnny and Eva from a lot of unhappiness.

He went on home, knowing now for sure that he had to go on a "swappin' spree" in Sugar Valley. Nesters were beginning to settle up there, and nesters were traders. Whenever Doc had a problem to solve, he went swapping. Somehow, swapping sort of sharpened his wits, helped him figure things out. . . .

**B**RIGHT and early the next morning, Doc Swap hooked his team of

matched bays to the old covered wagon in which he carried his "swappin' goods" and headed for Sugar Valley. Near the edge of town, he met a stranger riding a tired looking paint. The stranger, big and rawboned and yellow-haired, didn't as much as give Doc a nod.

Doc didn't like being ignored.

"Biggity actin' cuss," he muttered, craning his neck to look back.

The man, he saw, had slid to the ground and was talking with the blond Susie.

"Birds of a feather, likely," Doc mumbled, jogging his fat bays into an unwilling trot.

He reached Loop Porter's homestead right after noon, and here he found trouble brewing. Loop, his long, horse-face an angry red, was shaking a bony fist at his cousin, Puney Porter.

"Yuh ain't gonna gyp me, yuh under-sized son!" Loop bellowed at Puney. "We is gonna carry out grandpop's will to the letter, or my name ain't—"

"Yuh hard-headed ole fool!" Puney roared. "They ain't no possible way to carry out his will, an' yuh know it!"

Eyes bright with interest, Doc slid down from the covered wagon and waddled over the stony ground to the pigpen where the two men stood.

"It's like this here, Doc," Loop explained. "When Grandpop Porter died, he left half his pigs to me, a third to Puney, an' the rest to ole Uncle Bill. But Uncle Bill up an' drunk some bad corn liquor, an' where he is at now, he don't need no pigs."

"Seems plain enough to me," Doc said soothingly. "Yuh git half the pigs. Puney gits a third, an'—"

"Here's the hitch," Puney interrupted. "They's seventeen pigs! Yuh can't divide seventeen in halves an' thirds. I know fer sure, 'cause we tried."

"Fer ole Uncle Bill's share," Doc grinned, "I'll fix it up to ever'body's

satisfaction.”

“Hop to it, Doc,” Loop and Puney said.

Doc’s eyes traveled over the stony ground, fixed on a round, fat, speckled rock. He waddled over to the rock, picked it up and heaved it into the pigpen.

“That,” he wheezed, “we’ll call another pig.”

Loop and Puney eyed him suspiciously, but said nothing.

“Now,” Doc went on blandly, “we have amongst us eighteen pigs, countin’ the one I just tossed into the pen.” “Mebbe” Loop said cautiously.

“Half of eighteen is nine,” Doc continued unperturbed. “Yore share, Loop, is nine pigs. A third of eighteen is six.

That’s yore share, Puney. That leaves three fer me.”

Doc climbed over the fence and picked up the fat, speckled rock. “This here pig is mine. Yuh can pick out any other two yuh want to an’ give ‘em to me to make my share of three.”

Loop scratched his shaggy head.

“Le’s see,” he mumbled. “Nine an’ six an’ three is eighteen, shore as shootin’!”

“I’ll be danged!” Puney exploded. “Doc, I reckon yuh’re downright smart! I never would’ve figured out how to divide them seventeen pigs fair like that.”

“Me nuther,” Loop admitted, and shook Doc’s hand warmly.

A few minutes later, Doc drove on along the Sugar Creek Trail, a fat, speckled rock and two squealing pigs keeping him company.

Next, he came to Mule Turner’s place. Mule’s wife, Ida, was shoveling ear corn into a bin, while Mule and his hound dog stood in the shade, watching critically.

Ida leaned on the shovel handle and eyed Doc sourly.

“Yuh might as well drive on,” she said tartly. “Ain’t got no time to talk trade with you.”

“Now, Ida,” Mule protested mildly. “That ain’t no way—”

One of the pigs squealed, and Ida’s sweaty face brightened.

“With all this corn,” she said, “we could easy enough fatten us another pig.”

“I’m right fond of them pigs,” Doc said unhappily. “They is pets, but mebbe I could spare the runty one.”

“How much fer it?” Mule asked, looking into the wagon.

Doc’s eyes roved about, searching for “swappin’ goods.”

“Wouldn’t think of sellin’ it,” he said. “It’s too much like a ole friend. Might do a little swappin’, though.”

Doc drove away from Mule Turner’s minus one runty pig. But he’d traded for five bushels of corn, a somewhat faded but fancy bed quilt, and three squat whiskey bottles filled with homemade catsup and wrapped snugly in brown paper. And to-boot, a complete mail-order course on how to be a detective, including a box of disguises, all of which Mule had acquired in his younger and more ambitious days. Doc was a great “to-boot” swapper.

**A** MILE on down the trail, a rider on a sad looking hammerhead overtook him. The rider was Ham Brady, one of Sheriff MacLloyd’s occasional deputies.

“Howdy, Doc,” Ham said around a mouthful of fine-cut.

The deputy trapped in winters and loafed in summers, except when there was law trouble afoot in Bluff County. At all times, indoors and outdoors, he wore a squirrel skin cap. Doc saw that Ham now had on his tarnished lawman’s badge.

“Somebody done somethin’ unlawful?” Doc asked.

Ham pawed the tail of the squirrel skin cap out of his eyes.

“Gehenna’s gone an’ busted loose,” he replied. “Somebody’s run off with General

Buffelroy's head!"

"Do tell?" Doc mumbled. "How come anybody would want that hunk of marble?"

"Fer all them gold trimmin's an' the nameplate," Ham said.

"Never thought of that," Doc admitted.

"MacLoyd was takin' it over to Deacon Plumb's," Ham went on, "but he stopped at the barber shop on the way to play Cy Pulley a game of checkers. Cy was just finishin' givin' a yaller-headed stranger a shave. MacLoyd set the general's head on a chair. The next thing he knowed, Yaller-head was gone, an' so was the general's head."

Doc gave a little start. He remembered meeting the yellow-haired man at the edge of Dry Bluffs, seeing him talking to the blond Susie.

"I reckon he stole it," he observed.

Ham stuffed a second fistful of fine-cut into his mouth and shook his head sadly.

"Mebbe. Mebbe not. Anyhow, MacLoyd rounded Yaller-head up, but he didn't have the bust no place. Said he didn't know nothin' about it. MacLoyd's got him in jail now, but I reckon he won't be able to keep him long. Can't keep a jasper in jail without no evidence of guilt."

"I reckon not," Doc agreed.

"People, especially Deacon Plumb, is sayin' some mighty nasty things about MacLoyd. They allow how he was somewhat careless with the general's head an' all that gold trimmin'."

"Reckon he was," Doc said.

He grinned happily, not that he believed in theft, but it was nice to know that trouble had stuck the sheriff.

"MacLoyd," Doc went on, "is likely the poorest excuse fer a sheriff what ever lived."

"That's exactly what people is sayin'," Ham sighed. "They's sayin' that now would be a good time for MacLoyd to resign."

"Why, the blasted fools—" Doc began.

Then remembering what he'd just said himself, he clamped his mouth shut tightly. Not for the world would he admit that his sympathy was really with the sheriff.

"Kind of like to ketch up with that there gold-trimmed do-dad myself," Ham went on. "MacLoyd's offerin' a sizable reward fer it. I reckon he knows if that head don't show up 'fore Founders' Day, his goose is cooked."

Doc didn't doubt Ham's statement. The deacon was mighty influential in Bluff County politics. Then a pleasanter idea hit him.

"Ham," he said blandly, "what yuh need is a detective outfit. Look at this."

When Ham Brady rode away, he owned a box of disguises and a complete course on being a detective. Doc had a handsome box of face powder and perfume, which Ham had won on a punchboard in Red Dog that very day when he was supposed to be looking for the general's head. To boot, Doc had gotten a rope halter.

That night, the old swapper made camp at his favorite spot on Sugar Creek. He built a fire and got supper. Then, sighing contentedly, he took one of the bottles from its brown wrapper, opened it and poured catsup generously over a plate of fried spuds. He reckoned he was hungry enough to eat plate and all.

He had started on his third helping when a weary looking hombre with a guitar dangling from one shoulder rode up on one of the boniest horses Doc had ever seen. The pilgrim slid to the ground with a thud.

"People call me Singin' Satchelfoot Sam," he said, holding out a limp looking paw, Doc shook hands and found his fingers tingling from a viselike grip.

"I'm Doc Swap," he said, blinking at his hand.

Satchelfoot's long, nose twitched.

"Smells like cookin'. Reckon I could

eat a mite. How much yuh charge to fill up a hungry man, Doc? A quarter, mebbe?"

Doc glanced up and down the long, hollow looking length of man and shuddered slightly.

"Don't charge nothin'," he said. "Might do some swappin'."

"Ain't got nothin' to swap."

"Yuh got a gee-tar."

Satchelfoot looked sadly at the guitar.

"Couldn't sing without it," he said.

"But I can't sing on a empty stomach nohow. Okay, Doc, if yuh'll feed me up full, it's a deal."

After the man had finished eating, he got to his feet, groaned and looked unhappily at Doc.

"Now that I ain't hungry, I feel like singin'," he said.

Doc's innocent baby face remained expressionless.

The pilgrim sighed and looked at his bony horse. "Doc," he said, "I can't sing without my guitar. That hoss ain't much, but mebbe yuh'd trade me back my guitar fer him?"

Doc sighed in turn.

"Allus kinda wanted a gee-tar."

"Might throw in this here pocket knife to-boot," the man offered anxiously, holding out the knife.

Doc was a great hand for boot. The deal made, Singing Satchelfoot Sam walked on down the trail into the gathering darkness, singing happily and thumping the old guitar.

**S**TRETCHING his legs toward the dying campfire, Doc leaned back against a wheel of his covered wagon and made inventory. Starting with exactly nothing, he now had a fat, speckled rock, a pig, five bushels of corn, a fancy quilt, a box of cosmetics, a rope halter, a bony horse and a pocket knife. Not bad, but the old swapper felt far from satisfied. So far, Sheriff

MacLoyd still owned the Kingpin cowbell, and Johnny Goodland was up to his neck in trouble.

But there was a bright spot in the gloomy picture. MacLoyd was in hot water. Anything, just anything, could happen.

The next morning, Doc drove his matched bays deeper into the valley. In the distance he saw a man hobbling along, leading a limping horse. As the man and horse approached, a grin spread over Doc's whiskery face. The man was none other than Sheriff MacLoyd.

The sheriff's bony, sweat-streamed face wore a scowl that would scare a hungry grizzly. He glared up at Doc sitting in the comfortable shade of the covered wagon, and cursed expertly and expressively.

"My hoss picked up a nail," he said. "Here I am on foot, an' that yaller haired jasper gettin' farther away all the time!"

"Yaller haired jasper?" Doc asked, eyes wide.

MacLoyd repeated the deputy's story with the addition of some original and smoldering adjectives.

"Turned him loose," he finished, "figurin' he might've hid that bust of the general some 'ers an' would go pick it up. Started follerin' him, an' now I got a lame hoss an' have lost him."

"A bony, long-legged buzzard like you," Doc murmured. "oughta be able to keep up with—"

MacLoyd cursed savagely.

"I oughta take one of yore bays in the name of law an' gover'ment, yuh fat ole baboon!"

"I got a saddle hoss hitched on behind the wagon," Doc grinned. "If yuh want to do a little swappin'—"

MacLoyd hobbled around the wagon. His voice came back in a scream of rage.

"Yuh call that bag o' bones a saddle hoss?"

"Call it anything yuh like," Doc said, picking up the lines. "Reckon it would beat walkin' some. Giddap!"

MacLoyd spat derisively. His face had turned a mottled purple, but he knew when he was whipped.

"Name yore price, Doc," he said.

"Ain't fer sale," Doc said, "but we might swap."

MacLoyd's pale eyes narrowed. "Mebbe."

"They's a certain cowbell—" Doc began hopefully.

"Yuh dad-blamed ole thief!" MacLoyd bellowed. "I'd druther walk from here to Kingdom-come an' back than to swap that bell fer that critter tied to yore rattle-trap wagon!"

Doc sighed.

"Hardly expected yuh to swap," he admitted. "Might trade that hoss fer yourn. Ain't really much difference in 'em when yuh git right down to it. Only mine don't limp."

MacLoyd raved and threatened, but Doc stood firm. At last, the deal was made, and the sheriff, his face as grim as a hangman's noose, rode away on Singing Satchelfoot Sam's bony mount.

Doc took out time enough to clean up the injured foot of the sheriff's horse and to put some medicine on it before going on. Inwardly he felt like a small boy who'd won first prize in a foot race. Maybe he didn't have the Kingpin cowbell, but he sure was one up on Sheriff MacLoyd.

The old swapper's next stop was at Dogears Dover's place. Dogears, an old bachelor from Missouri, had brought to Sugar Valley a desire to do as little work as possible and twenty-one dogs of various descriptions. Now, the dogs came circling about Doc as he climbed down from the wagon. Dogears stuck his head through the door of his tar-papered shack to see the why-for of the commotion.

Seeing Doc, he ambled out into the grassless yard.

"Scat!" he bellowed at the dogs.

The dogs backed away from Doc and sat down in a circle near the shack. All except one, a flop-eared pup. He picked up a large bone, wagged up to Doc and laid the bone at his feet.

Dogears grinned proudly.

"Smartest pup I ever seed," he said. "Allus packin' stuff around. T'other day he brought me a newspaper he'd found some'ers." Dogears suddenly sobered. "Doc, yo'all wouldn't happen to have any hard cider, or somethin' drinkable with yuh, huh?"

Doc shook his head.

"Ain't even got a jug of water."

Dogears, disappointment on his seamy face, glanced into the covered wagon. He caught his breath, and his bleary eyes fixed on the paper-wrapped whisky bottles of catsup. All he could see was the shape of the bottles, but that was enough. His mouth began to water.

"What's in them packages, Doc?" he asked hoarsely.

"Two bottles of catsup," Doc answered truthfully, but with some unnecessary hesitation.

"Heh, heh!" Dogears said. "Allus was fond of catsup."

"Me, too," Doc admitted, and winked solemnly.

"Yuh wouldn't try to fool a feller, would yuh, Doc?"

"Mebbe," Doc answered slyly. "Mebbe not."

Dogears dug up a sack of cornmeal, a half-dozen hens, a large bottle of turpentine and some old cans of paint, and after considerable argument, threw in the flop-eared pup to-boot. For all this, he got the two packages with the two fat bottles in them.

Doc hastily climbed into his wagon and

unwound the lines from the brake handle.

Dogears opened the packages. For a full minute, he stood with his mouth hanging open, staring.

"Doc," he wheezed, "them bottles is full of catsup!"

"Yep," Doc said, slapping his bays into a trot. "Chuck full to the top."

AS HE headed back toward Sugar Creek to make his noon hour camp, old Doc Swap took mental account of his accumulations. A fat, speckled rock that he hadn't got around to throwing away, a rope halter, a pig and five bushels of corn to fatten him on, a quilt, a fancy box of perfume and powder, the sheriff's limping saddle horse, a pocket knife, a sack of cornmeal, half a dozen hens, turpentine and paint, and a flop-eared pup that had a habit of picking up things and bringing them to you.

Even with all this, Doc was no closer than before to the solution of his two problems—how to get the cowbell and how to save Johnny Goodland from a lot of trouble.

He reached the creek and saw that someone had beaten him to his camp site. A buggy hooked behind a shaggy white horse stood in the scant shade. Doc realized the outfit belonged to the Dry Bluffs livery barn.

He pulled his bays to a stop some distance away and stared curiously at the empty buggy. Sooner or later, he reckoned, the driver would show up.

He was right. In less than five minutes, the driver did show up. Susie, the golden-haired girl who was asking Johnny a thousand dollars for a thin package of letters, emerged from a clump of willows near the creek bank. Without looking in Doc's direction, she hurried toward the buggy.

Doc prodded his fat bays forward, and

the girl, hearing the rattle of the wagon, turned. As Doc drove up, she stood in the shade of a cottonwood, eyeing him coldly. The old swapper climbed to the ground, swept off his fancy hat and bowed deeply.

"Fine day fer buggy ridin'," he observed.

Susie's icy blue eyes slid over him.

"Yeah," she said. "That's what I thought."

The flop-eared pup sniffed at her feet, then turned his attention to the stump on which lay her handbag.

"Shoo!" Susie said to the pup.

"He won't hurt yuh," Doc told her. "Just got him in a little swap—"

"I don't like dogs," the girl said. "Speakin' of swappin'," Doc went on blandly, "got somethin' here yuh might like."

He dug the fancy box of powder and perfume out of his wagon and set it on the stump beside the handbag.

The girl's eye widened in surprise.

"Not bad stuff," she said, picking up the handbag. "How much do you want for it?"

"Why, now," Doc murmured, really thinking more about why Susie would come out here by herself than about what he was saying. "I ain't no hand to sell things."

Susie laid her handbag back on the stump, put her hands on her hips and eyed him narrowly.

"Meanin' what?" she asked.

The pup brushed against Doc's fat leg.

"Why," he said, glancing down at the pup. "I'm a—"

His voice trailed off at what he saw, and a trickle of sweat began to work its way down through his whiskers.

"I'll tell yuh what," he said, holding his voice steady with an effort, "I'll just give that stuff to yuh, Susie."

He turned on his heel and headed back

for his wagon, leaving the fancy box on the stump. The pup padded along at his heels. When the old swapper turned, he saw that Susie had picked up the box and was holding a bottle of perfume close to her nose.

"Smells right sweet, don't it?" he called.

She glanced up. The frost had gone out of her eyes.

"Not bad," she answered. "Thanks a million, mister."

She gathered up her handbag, clicked it shut and climbed into the buggy with Doc's present clutched in her fingers. She drove away rapidly.

Doc breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat off his face. He was mighty grateful to Ham Brady for that fancy box of cosmetics. Nothing like some "purties" to take a gal's mind off her business, he reckoned.

"Here, pup," he said, and the flop-eared little critter came wagging up to him, a thin bundle of papers in his mouth.

Sure enough, just as Doc had guessed when he'd first seen them in the pup's mouth, the papers turned out to be a small packet of letters that had fallen from Susie's open handbag to the ground at the foot of the stump.

"Smartest pup I ever seen!" he wheezed.

He glanced up the road. Susie had disappeared in the distance. Puffing a little, he plowed into the willows along the creek bank. It didn't take him long to find what Susie had left there—her suitcase. He lifted it. It was heavy. He opened the suitcase, and his fat lips puckered into a whistle. It wasn't exactly a whistle of surprise, for he'd already guessed that the general's head would be in it. He'd had a hunch all along that Susie and the yellow-haired man had teamed up in the theft. The man had stolen the bust, and Susie had hidden it in

her suitcase, then brought it out here for the man to pick up after the sheriff had released him.

**A**N HOUR later, from where he lay hidden on the far bank of Sugar Creek, Doc saw the yellow-haired man ride up to the willows, dismount and work his way in among them. A few minutes later, he came out with Susie's suitcase. He didn't bother to open it because it was heavy—just as it should be with the general's head in it. He heaved it up in front of the saddle and rode rapidly away.

Chuckling, Doc waddled back to where he'd hidden his wagon and headed back toward Dry Bluffs.

Dusk had just begun to move into Dry Bluffs when old Doc Swap drove along the one street. His eyes swept over the familiar scene, and a great contentment filled him. He reckoned that Dry Bluffs was about the nicest town in the world. And the most exciting.

A tall man came out of Cy Pulley's barber shop, halted and lit a cigarette. Doc jerked his bays to a stop.

"Hey, Johnny," he called.

Johnny Goodland flipped away the match and crossed over.

"Got another match?" Doc asked.

Johnny nodded. He still had a sick look in his eyes. He pulled out a match and held it toward Doc.

"Mebbe," Doc grinned, handing the package of letters to Johnny, "yuh'd better light it an' burn these."

Johnny, eyes popping, grabbed a wagon wheel for support.

"Doc," he gasped, "how'n thunder did you—"

"Never mind," Doc said. "G'by. Tell Eva hello fer me."

He drove on to the jail and found Sheriff MacLoyd sitting behind his desk, glaring across the room at the blank wall.

"Fine evenin'," Doc said with a sweep of his fancy Stetson.

"Poppycock!" MacLoyd flared.

"Got a lame hoss I might swap fer a bony one," Doc said.

The sheriff snorted.

"Ain't in no swappin" moo—yuh say a lame hoss fer a bony one?"

"Yep. Figured I might want a little to-boot, though."

The sheriff's bony face filled with rising anger.

"Figured mebbe," Doc went on, "that Kingpin lead steer bell might about even up the trade."

"Git out 'fore I throw yuh out!" MacLoyd bellowed. "Can't yuh see I ain't in no humor fer jokin'! Don't yuh know the general's head's—"

"Out in my wagon," Doc finished for him. "Gold trimmin's an' all. Wrapped in a ole quilt it won't get scratched. Figured I might throw the general in with the lame hoss. Wouldn't think of tryin' to swap even a flea-bit lame hoss fer a cowbell an' a right good hoss, even if he is a mite skinny."

The sheriff's face had lost its color.

"Doc," he wheezed, "yuh wouldn't joke me? Yuh—"

Doc picked up the cowbell. It was a beauty, and it had a deep tone that sent tingles of delight over him.

"It'll look right nice in my collection," he observed.

As old Doc Swap drove homeward, he met the blonde, Susie. He pulled up short, pawed his fancy Stetson from his head and gave her a deep bow.

She didn't smile at him, and from that he guessed she'd missed the letters. But she was the kind who didn't give up until her hand was called.

"Made a swap with a ole friend of yours," Doc said. "A yaller-haired hombre. Swapped him a fat, speckled rock fer a gold-trimmed hunk of marble."

The blood began to drain out of Susie's face.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," she said feebly.

"Of course," Doc went on blandly, "yore friend didn't know it. He just picked up the suitcase, an' feelin' how heavy it was, didn't stop to look inside. I reckon when he finds that speckled rock I swapped him, he's goin' to figure his little Susie give him the doublecross. He don't look like a hombre who'd like to be doublecrossed. Even by a purty gal like yuh. Wouldn't surprise me none if he'd come back this way—"

The whistle of the evening train cut through Doc's unfinished sentence. Susie didn't wait to hear any more. With a little choking gasp, she hurried toward the depot.

Smiling serenely, Doc drove on, enjoying that deep feeling of contentment which comes from doing a good turn for a couple of friends. And out-swapping one of them to-boot!