



Seven-spot's gunhand flashed up with a snub-nosed six. "Freeze!" he rasped

DOC SWAP TRICKS A TRICKSTER

By BEN FRANK

The tradin' hombre must match wits with a killer before he can find the right bait for a "fishy" swappin' surprise!

OLD DOC SWAP wasn't sure how he'd got himself into a dicker with Sheriff MacLloyd for the vacant lot across the street from Doc's neat little cottage at the edge of Dry Bluffs. But he was in it clear up to the tips of his red ears, and he wasn't getting any place.

MacLloyd shifted his long, bean-pole frame away from Cy Pulley's barber pole and sent a sizzling stream of tobacco juice harpooning through the warm evening air of early spring.

"Looky, yuh fat ol' baboon," the sheriff said, "there ain't a thing I'd consider in a swap for that vacant lot. Ten bucks cash is my price. Take it or leave it!"

He scrubbed a long-fingered hand across his big, sun-burned nose, gave Doc a gloating glance out of pale blue eyes and strode on toward the sun-warped, cracker-box jail.

Doc Swap stared after him, while inside him anger began to stir, turning his

round face an ear-matching red beneath his ragged white whiskers. In the first place, he didn't like being called a fat baboon. In the second place, his honor as the best swapper in Bluff County was at stake.

Sheriff MacLoyd was Doc's rival in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart—swappin' and fiddle playin'. For forty years, he and the sheriff had been trying to get the best of each other, and now to have the sheriff refuse even to talk trade was a challenge that could not be ignored.

Now, Doc had no need for that stony, weed-choked piece of ground. Because it belonged to MacLoyd, however, the old swapper wanted it in the worst way. But Doc was a swapper, not a buyer, and MacLoyd had demanded cash. Ten dollars was a fair price for the lot, but if the price had been ten cents, Doc wouldn't have bought it. He simply didn't do business that way.

Angrily, Doc jammed his fancy, pearl-gray Stetson—he'd traded a wind-blown old horse for the hat and considered the swap one of the high lights of his career—down over his shiny bald head and waddled on to the post office. He returned home, his fat fist viciously clutching a large brown envelope, stamped into his cottage and shut the door with a bang. His bright blue eyes whipped through the window to the vacant lot across the narrow, sun washed street. So MacLoyd wouldn't swap—

Now was the time for Doc to go on a "swapping spree" in Sugar Valley, and he knew it.

WHENEVER Doc Swap had a problem to solve, he made a trip into Sugar Valley where nesters were beginning to settle. Nesters were

swappers, and swapping sharpened Doc's mind. Helped him work things out.

Cussing softly into his white whiskers, Doc opened his one piece of mail, an almanac which suggested in big red letters that Dr. Bruce made the best spring tonic on the market. Absently the old swapper leafed through the pamphlet. He came to a page which held a fishing calendar. Friday, the thirteenth, he saw, was a good day to fish with live bait. The following page was headed, NEVER GIVE UP. LET DR. BRUCE HELP YOU.

Doc Swap's round face lost its scowl, and his fat lips puckered into a grin. Dr. Bruce had something there. Besides, this was Wednesday, the eleventh. You never could tell what would happen between Wednesday and Friday. Doc's smile widened. Two things Sheriff MacLoyd liked to do besides aggravate Doc—eat and fish. Why not take his friendly enemy, the sheriff, on a swapping spree in Sugar Valley?

Early the next morning, the old swapper ambled along the one street of Dry Bluffs, his fancy hat at a jaunty angle, a contented look on his innocent, baby face. He passed up the jail, whistling merrily. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the sheriff's bony face at the fly-specked window. Doc didn't let on. He just whistled a little louder and hurried a little faster, knowing that MacLoyd's curiosity would get the better of his judgment.

He came to Jeff Weber's general store and pushed in through the sagging screen door. Jeff, knowing Doc for a swapper and not a buyer, eyed him coolly and said nothing.

"Fine fishin' weather," Doc observed cheerfully.

"Mebbe," Jeff said cautiously.

"Reckon as how I'd like to look over yore fishin' tackle, Jeff," Doc smiled.

"Umm," Jeff murmured, unimpressed.

Doc waddled over to the fishing tackle counter and ran his pudgy fingers up and down a sleek casting rod.

“Purty,” he purred. “Mighty purty.”

The front door banged, and Sheriff MacLoyd barged into the store. Doc didn’t miss the look of curiosity on the sheriff’s bony face.

MacLoyd sidled up to the counter. “Thinkin’ of doin’ some fishin, Doc?” he asked carelessly.

Doc nodded. “Leavin’ at noon for Sugar Lake.”

MacLoyd lost his pretended carelessness. “Do tell?”

Doc nodded again and played with a reel. He noticed the price of the reel and shuddered. Why, dad-blast it, that reel cost enough to keep him in fish for three years.

“Been thinkin’ of takin’ off a few days and goin’ up there myself,” MacLoyd went on. “As ever’body knows, I’m a expert fisherman. Mebbe we could rig up to go together?”

Doc looked doubtful. “You’d have to have a good fishin’ outfit. Then there’d be grub and—”

MacLoyd bristled. “I got the best fishing outfit in the county! As fer expenses, I reckon I can furnish my share—”

Doc shook his head firmly. “Since I’m furnishin’ the transportation, I wouldn’t take no one who wouldn’t furnish all the grub. No, I reckon I’ll go alone and enjoy—”

“Phooey!” MacLoyd spat. “If yuh went alone, yuh wouldn’t get a nibble. As fer the grub, I’ll furnish it.”

“Well, if yuh insist,” Doc said, weakening.

Sheriff MacLoyd grinned hugely, figuring he’d won a point over Doc.

“Got me some new canned bait I been wantin’ to try all spring,” he said happily.

“Live bait is what yuh want to use,”

Doc said contrarily.

MacLoyd scowled. He didn’t like to have anyone tell him anything about fishing. Especially Doc Swap.

“Now, looky, yuh fat ol’ swindler,” he began. “I know—”

“Gentlemen,” a silky voice asked, “could it be you’re havin’ a argument?”

BOTH Doc and MacLoyd whirled to face a tall, thin stranger with a sad, pale face and snaky green eyes. He wore a wrinkled old store suit and a green shirt without collar or tie. There was a bulge in his right coat pocket that suggested a six-gun. He had come into the store as quietly as a snake through grass. In fact, there was something snaky about his entire appearance.

MacLoyd’s scowl deepened. Strangers in town always aroused his suspicions.

“I say canned bait is what is best to use this time of year,” he said heatedly. “Doc, the fat ole goat, ain’t been fishin’ fer twenty years, but he says live bait—”

“Gentlemen,” the stranger interrupted with a humble bow of his black, longhaired head, “no argument was ever won.”

MacLoyd swore brilliantly. “Who says so?”

“I do,” the stranger smiled. “Me—Seven-spot Slim. Sheriff—I recognize the badge of your honored office—watch this closely.”

The man drew a pair of green dice from a vest pocket and rolled them expertly across the counter. They stopped, showing a six and a one.

“Loaded,” the stranger smiled. “They always come up that way. That’s why I’m knowed as Seven-spot Slim.”

“We don’t allow no crooked gamblin’ in tow—”

The stranger looked shocked. “I never gamble, Sheriff. I use these here dice only

to settle disputes.”

He gathered up the dice and rattled them in his bony paw.

“These here dice look as alike as two peas in a pod. Only way you can tell ‘em apart is to roll ‘em.” He gave one of the cubes to the sheriff and the other to Doc. “Roll ‘em, gentlemen. The one with the high number wins the argument. Why? Because Lady Fate has stepped in and give the winnin’ dice to the one who is right about the bait.”

Doc and MacLoyd rolled the dice. Doc’s dice came up with a one. The sheriff rolled a six.

The stranger slapped both Doc and MacLoyd on their respective backs, and said, “Sheriff, you win. Canned bait is best for this time of year!”

The sheriff looked highly pleased, and his momentary suspicions of “Seven-spot-Slim” were completely forgotten.

“Seven-spot,” he observed, “I reckon yuh got somethin’ there with them Lady Fate dice.”

“Gentlemen,” Seven-spot went on smoothly, “I happened to hear about your proposed fishin’ trip. By profession, I’m a cook. Also, I love the great outdoors. Nothin’ would make me happier than to go out into the wilds with you two. I offer my services as cook and handy-man and ask only to be fed.”

Doc blinked twice rapidly and stared at the man. There was something fascinating about the snaky-eyed hombre. Doc reckoned that Seven-spot Slim might prove to be an entertaining jasper to have along, so he shook his head violently. MacLoyd saw the head shake and immediately made up his mind to the contrary, which was exactly as Doc had planned it.

“Delighted to have yuh, Seven-spot,” MacLoyd said.

Doc smiled inwardly and said nothing. The three of them started for the door, and Jeff Weber, the store keeper, eyed Doc coldly.

“Say, Doc, ain’t yuh goin’ to buy yoreself no fishin’ traps fer this trip?” he asked.

Doc smiled blandly and shook his head.

“Why, no, Jeff,” he answered. “Seems I ain’t in no buyin’ mood this mornin’.”

He followed MacLoyd and Seven-spot Slim out into the bright spring sunshine.

“I better go an’ get my mail,” the sheriff was saying.

“Allow me, Sheriff,” Seven-spot said, “Nothin’ would please me more’n to do a favor for a fine lawman an’ a gentleman like you.”

“Why—why,” MacLoyd sputtered, almost too pleased to talk, “since yuh put it that way, go ahead.”

Seven-spot shuffled toward the post office, and MacLoyd smiled happily at Doc.

“A fine feller, that hombre,” he said. “A true gentleman!”

AT NOON, MacLoyd and Seven-spot Slim arrived at Doc’s neat little cottage. Staggering behind them came Ham Brady, MacLoyd’s deputy, carrying a back-breaking load of bedding, grub and fishing equipment.

Ham trapped in winters and loafed in summers when he wasn’t acting as deputy. All seasons, day and night, indoors and out, he wore a squirrel skin hat and chomped at a mouthful of finecut. He dumped the load beside Doc’s covered wagon, in which the old swapper carried his “swappin’ goods.”

“Doc,” he said, pawing the tail of the cap out of his eyes, “it seems Lady Fate done make a pack hoss outa me.”

Doc glanced at Seven-spot Slim. The snaky-eyed, sad-faced man smiled innocently and rattled the dice in his fist.

"I started to help the sheriff carry this stuff," he murmured, "but the deputy came along, and Lady Fate—"

Ham swore and spat noisily. He finished the outburst with, "Any last minute instructions, Sheriff?"

MacLoyd shook his head. "Nope. Of course, if anything extra special comes up, yuh can ride out an' let me know."

Ham got the kinks out of his back, cast one baleful look at Seven-spot Slim and headed back the way he had come.

Sheriff MacLoyd dug into the pile of equipment and came up with a new pair of hightop, waterproof boots.

"Got 'em special fer this trip," he said, sliding his big feet into the new boots and discarding the old.

Doc eyed the old boots with interest. Anything had "swappin'" possibilities. Even a pair of worn out boots.

"Through with 'em?" he asked, picking up the boots.

MacLoyd's thin lips curled. "They ain't no good."

Doc tossed them into his covered wagon without comment.

The sheriff and Seven-spot began to load the equipment into the covered wagon, while Doc hooked up his team of sleek, fat bays.

"Where's yore fishin' tackle, Doc?" MacLoyd asked.

"Oh," Doc murmured, "reckon I'll pick it up as we go along."

The sheriff snorted with disgust, but said no more. Personally, he had an idea that Doc wouldn't get a single fish.

A few minutes later, the three were on their way, Doc and the sheriff perched on the sagging spring seat and Seven-spot Slim sitting cross-legged on a pile of

bedding, rolling his loaded dice across the floor of the bouncing wagon.

Two miles out of town, they met a squat horseman with a red nose and a star pinned to a sweaty shirt. He was the sheriff of Osage County, which lay on the far side of Sugar Creek Pass. Doc pulled his team to a halt, and Sheriff MacLoyd unloaded an enormous cud of tobacco and greeted his colleague affably.

"Reckon yuh didn't pick up that feller I writ yuh about?" the Osage sheriff asked.

"Didn't get no letter from yuh," MacLoyd said.

"Should've. I mailed it yesterday." The Osage sheriff blew his red nose and cursed a fly that tried to land on one of his ears. "A feller wanted for wife desertion an' for shootin' a couple of jaspers in a gamblin' game."

"What kind of a gamblin' game?" Doc murmured, casting a cautious eye at Seven-spot Slim, who remained well out of sight beneath the canvas cover of the wagon.

"Don't know," the sheriff answered. "Them two fellers is too dead to tell."

"By now," MacLoyd said, "Ham has likely got your letter. I'm on my vacation, and Ham's in charge at the office. Yuh go on in an' talk to him. Mebbe he's picked this here killer up by now."

The Osage County sheriff rode on.

"Mebbe," MacLoyd worried, "I should ought to go back an' look after things."

Seven-spot Slim moved to the front of the wagon.

"Don't be hasty, my friend," he said, handing MacLoyd a green dice. "Roll it—a six says you go back, a one says you go fishin'."

MacLoyd rolled the dice, and Lady Fate spoke with a one spot.

Seven-spot Slim dropped back on the pile of bedding with a sigh.

“Wife desertion is a low-down, dirty trick,” he said with a swing of his head that reminded Doc of a rattler about to a strike. “Also, so is killin’ a couple of gents for money.”

A little later, they came to Sugar Creek, and Doc let his bays drink from the crystal clear water.

SEVEN-SPOT SLIM poked his longhaired head out from under the canvas and stared about.

“How I love the great outdoors,” he murmured. “It fills—”

A plump squirrel ran along a cottonwood limb, and the man’s voice choked in his throat.

“Fresh meat!” he said hoarsely and whipped a snub-nosed six-shooter from his coat pocket with the speed of light.

The gun roared, and the squirrel, shot neatly through the head, tumbled to the ground.

Sheriff MacLoyd’s pale eyes bugged. “By gum,” he said admiringly, “that’s what I call right good shootin’!”

Seven-spot Slim looked slightly embarrassed.

“Just a accident,” he mumbled. “I reckon I couldn’t do that again in a thousand years.”

Doc Swap stared down at the dead squirrel and shuddered slightly. Accident or not, he was remembering how the man had kept hidden from the sheriff of Osage County.

On the other side of the creek they came to the lane that led to Mule Turner’s homestead. Doc swung the bays into the lane, and MacLoyd’s bony face stiffened.

“Looky,” he said, “this is supposed to be a fishin’ trip, not a swappin’ spree. Back up and—”

“Now, hold yore hosses,” Doc protested. “Whose wagon’re yuh ridin’ in? Besides, I got a feelin’ I ought to stop

and—”

“If we stop at ever’ place we come to, we’ll never get—”

“Gentlemen,” Seven-spot Slim said smoothly, “remember, no argument is ever won. Let Lady Fate decide.”

He handed Doc and MacLoyd each a green dice. Glaring at each other, the two oldsters put the decision in the hands of Lady Fate. Doc won the toss.

The old swapper beamed on Seven-spot Slim. “Seems as how yore dice is almost human,” he observed.

MacLoyd swore darkly and bit off half a plug of tobacco.

They found Ida, Mule Turner’s husky spouse, working the handle of a pump savagely, while Mule stood close by in the shade of a sickly maple, sadly watching the pump spout, from which no water flowed.

“Well dry?” Doc asked.

Mule shook his shaggy head. “Nope. Reckon the leathers is worn to a frazzle and there ain’t no suction.”

“Why don’t yuh fix ‘em?” Doc wondered.

Ida stopped pumping and gazed up out of angry eyes set in a rugged and sweaty face. “Reckon we would if we had the fixin’s.”

Doc sighed and picked up the sheriff’s discarded boots.

“Lots of leather in these uppers,” he murmured. “Figurin’ on makin’ me some half-soles outa—”

“Doc,” Ida said hoarsely, “how much will you take for—”

“Ain’t for sale,” Doc said sadly. “Fact is, the half-soles on my shoes is as thin as—Howsomever, mebbe we could do a little swappin’.”

When the two fishermen and their snaky-eyed handy-man drove away from the homestead, the Turners had new leathers for their pump, and Doc had two

warped cane fishing poles, a battered dishpan and an old flour sifter to boot. Doc had no particular need for the flour sifter, but he hadn't been able to resist talking Ida into throwing it in to boot.

On the Sugar Creek Trail again, they met a sway-backed horse pulling a small spring wagon with an enclosed top. The driver had a beak nose and a corncob pipe. He was known up and down the valley as Purkey, the Picture Man. He made photographs of anything for a price and developed them himself. This afternoon, he wore a scowl and puffed angry clouds of smoke from his smelly pipe.

"Yuh look mighty upset, Purkey," Doc observed.

The grizzled photographer blew a foghorn blast through his beak nose and glared at Doc.

"Am upset. My developin' pan's sprung about sixteen leaks all to once. And here I got me a bunch of pictures to make and—"

His voice stuck in his scrawny throat, for Doc had lifted the old dishpan from the bottom of the wagon.

"I'll buy that pan from yuh, Doc," Purkey wheezed.

"Sure wish I could let yuh have it, Purkey," Doc said regretfully. "But we're goin' fishin', an' I need it to keep my minnows in. Yuh see—"

"Look," Purkey wheedled, "yuh can have my ol' pan. Yuh could set it on a rock in shallow water, and it'll let in enough fresh water to keep yore minneys alive."

Doc's innocent blue eyes widened admiringly. "Purkey, yuh're about the smartest feller I ever see. Mebbe we can do business."

DOC let Purkey have the dishpan. For it, Doc got the old leaky developing pan and a promise from the photographer

to visit their fishing camp on Friday, the thirteenth. As Doc Swap put it, "I reckon the sheriff and me'd like to have our pictures took with all them fish we're goin' to ketch."

After they'd started on, MacLoyd swore long and loudly. "At this rate," he complained, "we'll be a month gettin' to the lake. And as fer pictures of yore fish—Doc, yuh ain't even got yoreself a fishin' outfit."

Doc grinned happily. He always enjoyed seeing MacLoyd get worked up about something.

That evening, they chose a camp site on the right bank of Sugar Creek. Doc climbed stiffly to the ground and stretched the kinks out of his back. Sheriff MacLoyd followed suit. Seven-spot Slim stuck his head into the open and smiled.

"The great outdoors," he murmured. "How I love—"

A sharp buzz sounded at Doc's feet, and the old swapper's eyes fixed on the swinging head of a coiled rattler. MacLoyd had seen the sidewinder, too. Both men knew better than to move.

Seven-spot Slim's gun hand streaked to his pocket. His snub-nosed gun flashed up, blasted, and the rattler's head disappeared.

"Never had no use for rattlesnakes," Seven-spot said apologetically. Calmly, he reloaded his gun and dropped it back into the pocket. "Now," he went on, "you gents just take it easy while I fix the grub."

MacLoyd dropped down weakly on a weathered stump. Doc stood blinking first at the headless snake and then at Seven-spot Slim. The difference between the rattler and the man was that Seven-spot still had a head. The old swapper felt a chill steal through him. Again he was remembering how the long-haired man had kept himself hidden from the sheriff of Osage County.

However, Seven-spot Slim could cook. For supper they had young fried squirrel with gravy, fluffy mashed potatoes and flaky biscuits. After eating enough for three ordinary men, MacLoyd sagged against a tree trunk and belched happily.

"Seven-spot," he said, "yuh are, besides bein' a scholar and a gentleman, likely the best cook west of the Mississippi."

The snaky-eyed cook looked embarrassed. "Them kind words from a great citizen of a great state, I accept with deep gratitude," he murmured.

MacLoyd burped again. Doc sighed and kept his eyes fixed on Seven-spot's sagging coat pocket. MacLoyd had his sixgun along, buckled around his thin waist, but, Doc was positive, he was no match for Seven-spot Slim when it came to shooting.

Just as they were thinking about turning in for the night, a horseman came rattling up out of the darkness. He was Ham Brady, MacLoyd's deputy. He slid to the ground, pawed the tail of the squirrelskin cap out of his eyes and unloaded an enormous chew of fine-cut.

"Sheriff," he wheezed, "seems like there's a killer on the loose. The sheriff from Osage stopped by. That letter he writ yuh and the picture of the killer didn't come. Thought, mebbe, I should let yuh know."

MacLoyd frowned at the dying camp fire.

"I wisht I knowed what this feller looks like," he growled.

"The sheriff described him some," Ham said. "Seems he's kind of long an' lanky an' needs a haircut. 'Course, by now, he's likely got the haircut. Sort of mean eyed and—"

"Lots of long, lanky jaspers around," the sheriff said shortly. "I'm one. And so is Seven-spot Slim."

At that moment, Seven-spot Slim appeared with a plate heaped high with food and shoved it under Ham's eager nose.

Ham drooled, "Seven-spot, even if yuh do sort of fit the description of that wife deserter and killer, I reckon yuh got a heart of pure gold!"

"Thank you, Deputy," Seven-spot responded humbly.

"Reckon I'd better give this fishin' trip up," MacLoyd said, "and get back home on the job. This killer—"

"Don't be hasty, friend," Seven-spot smiled. "Let Lady Fate be your guide."

LADY FATE told MacLoyd to go fishing and leave the capture of the outlaw up to Ham Brady. A little later, so full of good food that he had trouble mounting his horse, Ham Brady rode alone back toward Dry Bluffs.

The next morning, the three travelers came to Ed Lunt's place, and Lady Fate decreed that they stop for a visit. Ed was laying a concrete walk between the kitchen door and the woodshed, while Minnie, her bony face screwed up in critical disapproval, watched her husband work.

"It don't look as smooth as them walks we saw in Junction City," she said.

"Trouble is," Ed sighed, "I ain't got no sand sifter. If I could sift the big hunks outa that sand and—"

"Got just what yuh want," Doc said, holding up the flour sifter.

After considerable disagreement and a couple rolls of the Lady Fate dice, Doc swapped the sifter for a fishline which Ed had used to mark a straight path for the new walk, a can of strawberry preserves, half a bottle of glue guaranteed to stick to anything, and a cook book to boot. Of course, with Seven-spot Slim along, a cook book was unnecessary baggage, but

Doc was a great hand for boot.

At noon, Seven-spot stirred up another batch of biscuits. Doc opened the strawberry preserves, and Sheriff MacLoyd eyed them hungrily.

“Reckon, Doc, since I give yuh them ol’ boots,” he said, “yuh’ll share them preserves with me.”

Doc shook his head firmly. “Why, no. Yuh threwed them boots away. That was the same as throwin’ away any claim on these strawberry preserves.”

MacLoyd swallowed audibly. He could almost taste those preserves on Seven-spot’s flaky, hot biscuits.

“Now, Doc,” he growled, “who’s furnishin’ the flour fer—”

“Yuh are,” Doc snapped. “It was yore own idea, too.”

“Now, looky, yuh hard-headed ol’ swindler—”

The dice rattled in Seven-spot’s long-fingered hand. “Gentlemen, let Lady Fate—”

“Fate ain’t got no hand in these preserves,” Doc said stubbornly.

MacLoyd, however, did get half the preserves. But not before he’d swapped some fishhooks, bobbers and sinkers for it.

As Seven-spot Slim cleaned up the dishes and pans, Doc leaned back against a wagon wheel and made a mental note of his accumulations. For an old pair of boots which had cost him nothing, he now had two cane poles, fishing tackle, a pan to hold minnows, a half bottle of glue, a cook book, and a promise from Purkey, the Picture Man, to meet him at Sugar Lake to take pictures of the catch. Not bad, yet Doc felt a deep dissatisfaction. He hadn’t so far figured out a way to get the vacant lot from MacLoyd. But he remembered Dr. Bruce’s almanac and felt some better. Never give up, Dr. Bruce had said.

Before they got around to breaking camp, a half dozen punchers from the

Double-O ranch came riding up in a swirl of gray dust. They wondered if they could use Seven-spot’s dying campfire to warm up their noon meal.

Seven-spot’s greenish eyes slid over the outfit, noting a spare saddle on a spare horse and the pack animal loaded with grub. He casually handed a left-over biscuit to Rip Riley, the Double-O foreman.

Rip took one sample of the biscuit, and his chin quivered.

“Man,” he exploded, “what I’d give for a pan of biscuits like that!”

Seven-spot made a deal. If Rip would furnish the makings, he’d cook up a meal for the outfit. Of course, he’d expect a little something for his work. Maybe, that old saddle on the spare horse, and a blanket to boot.

MacLoyd immediately opposed the deal because of the delay it would cause.

“Thunderation,” he roared, “at the rate we’re movin’, we won’t get to Sugar Lake ‘fore it freezes up next winter!”

Doc, smiling happily, thought it would be nice for Seven-spot to cook the Double-a boys a real feed. A roll of the dice proved that Lady Fate thought likewise, so the lanky, green-eyed cook peeled off his coat, hung it over the brake rod of Doc’s wagon and got busy.

THE old swapper’s keen, blue eyes fastened on the sagging pocket of Seven-spot Slim’s wrinkled coat. Cussing softly into his ragged whiskers, he reached into the wagon and picked up the glue bottle.

Sheriff MacLoyd’s pale eyes were fixed in a cold, angry stare on the bustling cook.

“I could of walked to Sugar Lake and back three times while we’re makin’ this one trip!” he growled.

Doc, overhearing the bony sheriff, felt

a warm happiness steal through him. He reckoned he hadn't seen MacLoyd so upset for a long time.

When the Double-O boys began to finish up their food, Doc found the dog-eared cook book, moved out where he would be noticed, put an intent expression on his ruddy face and began to read.

"What're yuh readin', Doc?" Rip Riley wanted to know.

Doc took the foreman off to one side and showed him the cook book.

"How'd yuh like yore dinner, Rip," Doc asked in a hushed voice.

Rip licked his lips. "Ain't had one like it for thirty years."

"With a cook book like this," Doc whispered, "no reason why yore own cook can't do as well as ourn. I reckon Seven-spot's got all these receipts down pat, so yuh might as well take this along. Of course, I'd expect to do a little swappin'."

The Double-O boys got the cook book. Doc got an old lariat, a jackknife, a pair of rusty horseshoes, a pair of lace curtains which one of the boys had picked up in a poker game, and a brass ring with a red set.

In the middle of the afternoon, they came to the Zook homestead, and the green dice thought it would be nice if Doc should stop for a chat with the Zooks.

Mrs. Zook liked the lace curtains. Also, her husband, who wasn't at home, owned a minnow seine and a fancy, chain fish-stringer. For the curtains, Doc got the seine and the fish-stringer to boot.

Now, he reckoned, he had all the fishing equipment he needed, so there was no point in stopping along the trail to do any more swapping. Besides, tomorrow was Friday, the thirteenth, which, according to Dr. Bruce's almanac, was the day to fish with live bait.

Doc jogged his bays into a trot. That night, they made camp on the shore of

Sugar Lake in the shade of a clump of tall pines.

Seven-spot Slim took a deep breath of the tangy, mountain air and rubbed his long fingers together.

"The great outdoors," he murmured. "How I love it!"

Friday, the thirteenth, dawned bright and calm, and Sugar Lake was like a dazzling mirror, except for the places where the fish broke the smooth surface. MacLoyd shucked out his can of prepared bait, limbered up his fancy fishing tackle and headed for the water's edge. Doc gave Seven-spot Slim the old lariat to help him seine some minnows. With the minnows safely in the leaky developing pan, he and the snaky-eyed cook ambled down to the lake. Doc fastened lines to the cane poles, hooks to the lines and minnows to the hooks. Seven-spot let Lady Fate choose the right spot for Doc to do his fishing. And the fish chose Doc's live minnows rather than MacLoyd's canned bait.

The sheriff soon gave up on the canned bait. Next he tried a bright red plug. Then he put his fly rod together and whipped the likely looking spots along the shore. He might as well have been sitting in his office in Dry Bluffs.

Several times he cast wistful glances at the pan of minnows, but said nothing. Not for all the fish in Sugar Lake would he admit that he'd picked the wrong kind of bait.

A BIG fellow took Doc's hook, and for a few minutes he had a fight on his hands. Puffing like a winded plow horse, he at last flopped the fish out on the shore. It was then that he noticed the absence of Seven-spot Slim.

Doc looked toward camp and discovered that Lady Fate had led him a good half mile from the pines. He glanced at MacLoyd. The sheriff was still farther

away from the camp. Doc shoved to his feet, suddenly fearing that in the excitement of fishing, he'd made a serious mistake.

"Shouldn't never've let him outa my sight!" he wheezed.

"Shut up!" MacLoyd rasped. "How'n tarnation can a feller fish with somebody yellin'—"

"Come on, yuh ol' coyote!" Doc panted. "It just might be that a wife deserter and a killer is about to get away from yuh!"

"Doc," MacLoyd declared, "yuh're as crazy as a one-eyed steer full of loco weed! Set down and—"

But Doc's fat legs were pumping him along the lake shore toward the camp, which lay hidden behind the trees. On second thought, MacLoyd decided to follow.

The sheriff caught up with Doc just as he broke through the pines into the clearing. Both men stopped and stared. Things were strung around the campsite as if they had been hit by a tornado. One of Doc's bays stood saddled and bridled. The other was loaded with a pack made of an old blanket and tied with the lariat. And Seven-spot Slim had one foot in a stirrup and was all set to mount and ride away.

"Hey!" MacLoyd bellowed. "Where do yuh think yuh're goin'?"

Seven-spot Slim whirled. His gunhand flashed up with the snub-nosed six.

"Freeze!" he rasped.

Doc froze but he didn't lift his hands. MacLoyd's bony face turned the color of wet putty, and his skinny, arms shot straight up in the air. He blinked his pale eyes rapidly and was filled with a great understanding.

"Why," he sputtered, "yuh're the jasper the Osage County sheriff is a-lookin' for!"

"Yeah," Seven-spot admitted readily. "Figured as long as I was in the company of a sheriff, I'd be safe from another sheriff, or a posse. But now that you've traveled as far as you're goin', reckon I'll go on into the mountain alone. Before I go, I reckon you'd better shuck your gun and toss it into the lake!"

MacLoyd moved a wooden-muscled hand toward his six-gun. Remembering the killer's gun skill, he knew better than to attempt to draw and shoot. His fingers touched the gun butt, lifted it with great care. Beads of sweat stood out on his bony face. He was thinking about that dead squirrel and the headless rattler.

A low chuckle escaped from old Doc Swap.

"Don't throw yore gun away, Sheriff," he advised. "Just point it at the owlhooter and tell him the game's up!"

"Fatty," Seven-spot rasped, "I've a mind to shoot a hole or two into that fancy hat of yourn!"

"Not with that gun yuh won't," Doc said blandly. "Yesterday noon, I poured glue into it. Why, I reckon that glue's dried now till yuh couldn't move the hammer or trigger with a crowbar!"

Seven-spot Slim's finger whitened on the trigger. Nothing happened. He cursed and took one look at MacLoyd's gun, which now centered on a spot between his snaky eyes, and decided that Doc was right. The game was up.

Doc gave MacLoyd a friendly smile. "Fer puttin' glue in that feller's gun," he said, "I reckon yuh owe me somethin', Sheriff. Mebbe, that vacant lot—"

"Don't be a fool!" MacLoyd snorted. "All the glue in kingdom come wouldn't of caught this killer. I did that with my six-shooter! I reckon yuh owe me somethin'. I kept him from stealin' yore team. I reckon I'll just double the price of that lot, Doc."

Doc Swap felt a great anger stir up in him.

His round face got a brick red, and his whiskers stood on end like the hair on a frightened cat's back.

"Why, why, yuh on-grateful ole cuss!" he sputtered. "Yuh schemin', lyin' hoss-thief of a—a—"

Doc never could talk when he was mad, and MacLoyd knew it. The grin on the sheriff's bony face spread. Right at the moment, he was enjoying himself more than he had for years.

DOC lifted his angry eyes and saw coming along the road behind a sway-backed old horse his ace-in-the-hole card, Purkey, the Picture Man, had kept his promise to visit the camp on Friday, the thirteenth.

The anger went out of Doc in a hurry, and an innocent look filled his baby face.

"While yuh're lookin' after yore prisoner," he said carelessly, "I reckon I'll go have my picture took with that string of fish."

MacLoyd batted his pale eyes in some surprise.

"Too bad, Sheriff," Doc went on, "yuh don't have no fish so's yuh could show the people back home that yuh're a fisherman like yuh been braggin'. Yuh with all that fancy outfit—why, I reckon ever'body'll be splittin' their sides, laughin' at how yuh didn't catch no fish. Wouldn't surprise me none if the story got in the paper. Of course, if yuh wanted yore picture took

with all my fish so's yuh could disprove anything I'd say, why mebbe—"

MacLoyd wiped the sweat off his bony face. He had done too much bragging about his expensive fishing equipment, and his prowess as a fisherman to go home empty-handed. Doc had him across a barrel, and the sheriff knew it. He also knew that many a politician has been laughed out of office.

"Doc," he wheezed, "on second thought, I reckon that vacant lot ain't worth no ten dollars to me. I might even swap it for a string of fish."

Doc smiled happily and sat down on a fallen pine log.

"I'll keep a eye on yore prisoner," he offered, "while yuh go down an' have yore picture took, Sheriff."

Watching MacLoyd hurry toward the lake shore, Doc reckoned that Dr. Bruce's almanac plus a nudge now and then from Lady Fate had saved his honor as a swapper and had got him a free fishing trip to boot.

Then seeing Seven-spot Slim, his face as sad as a grave, roll the dice into the sunlight, Doc realized for the first time that the dice were not identical. The one that always came up six was a trifle darker green than the other. So, he knew, Lady Fate must be ruled out. That left it up to Dr. Bruce and, without doubt, to Doc's ability as a swapper.

The grin on his round face widened and reached out for his red, sun-burned ears.