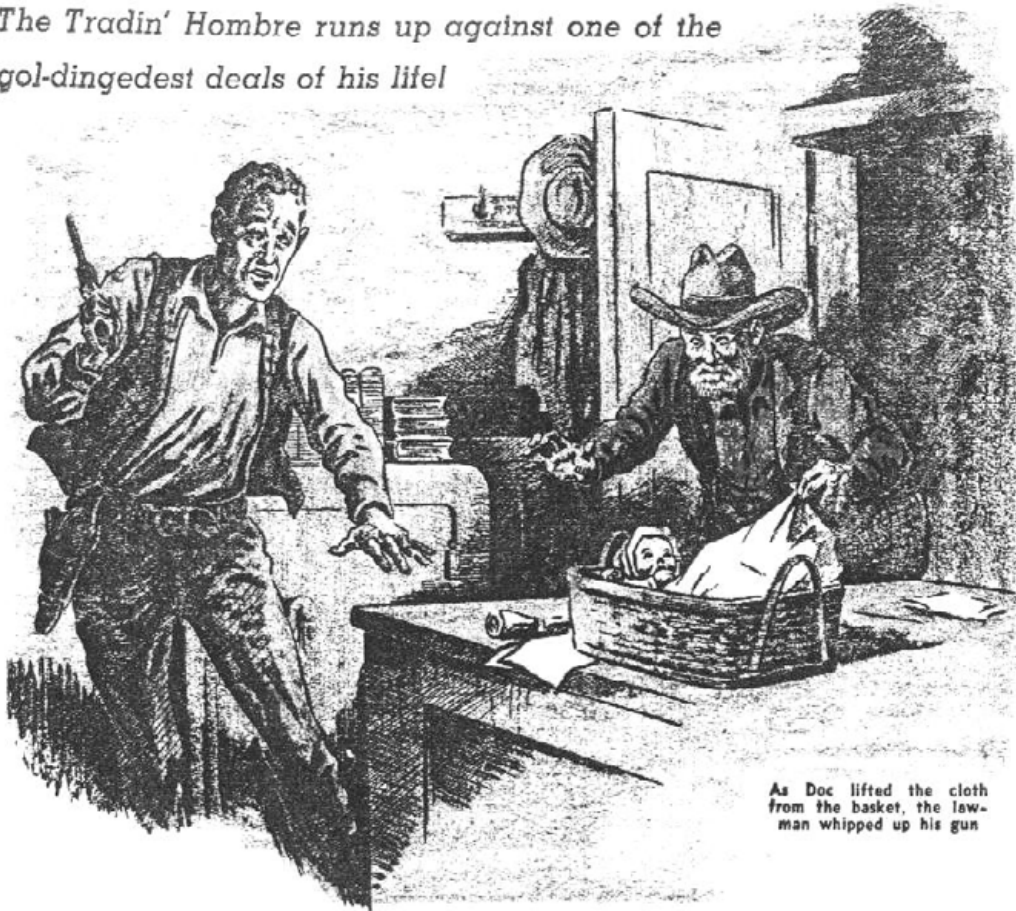


The Tradin' Hombre runs up against one of the gol-dingested deals of his life!



DOC SWAP'S CABIN COUP

By BEN FRANK

MUSIC filled the night. "Pop! goes the weasel," the old fiddle sang.

Old Doc Swap, sitting in his favorite chair in the neat front room of his cottage at the edge of Dry Bluffs, reckoned he hadn't been in such good fiddle playing trim for a long time. His sock feet stamped out the time on the bare floor, and his round, whiskery face wore a pleased expression. The music sounded so fine he reckoned he ought to round up Sheriff MacLoyd and show him how a good fiddle, rightly played, could just about make the furniture dance all over the room.

Thinking of Sheriff MacLoyd, he frowned slightly and hit a sour note. For forty years, Doc and MacLoyd had been bitter rivals in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart—fiddle playin' and swappin'.

Doc lowered his fiddle, and his keen blue eyes lifted to the clock above the native rock fireplace. Eleven o'clock! He realized with a start that he'd been sawing away right at three hours, and he hadn't had his usual nightcap at Goop Gibson's Palace Saloon.

"Dad-blast time, anyway!" he muttered, laying the red-gold fiddle in its worn case.

“Goes faster’n a spooked coyote!”

Ten minutes later, Doc wheezed through the batwings of the Palace. Eyes lifted to his ruddy face, and grins and friendly nods greeted him. Doc was well liked—and good for a little fun. Especially if Sheriff MacLoyd’s name could be injected into the conversation.

As Doc waddled up to the bar, he heard Dooley Dobson, the depot agent, mutter,

“First time I ever got a telegram an’ didn’t know what to do with it. Addressed to Mary Gregg. Don’t know no Mary Gregg.”

“I do,” Doc said. “She’s a new nester in Sugar Valley. Swapped her a basket fer a ole hat.”

“No boot?” Cy Pulley, the barber, said with a wink.

Doc remembered the Gregg cabin. The poor furniture. The scanty meal on the table. Mary Gregg’s tired, hopeless eyes.

“Doc,” Goop Gibson, the barkeep, grinned, “yo’re slippin’.”

DOC grinned back and nodded his head. He’d felt mighty sorry for Mary Gregg, left alone with her blue-eyed baby girl. He put one foot on the brass rail and frowned.

“I come fer my nightcap,” he said to Goop.

The barkeep dug into the wooden icebox and came up with a bottle of strawberry pop. When he was in Dry Bluffs Doc never missed having a bottle of strawberry pop before going to bed. As usual, he didn’t pay for it. He was a swapper, not a buyer, and had made a trade with Goop a few days before for a case of pop.

“Well,” Dooley Dobson growled, “I ain’t deliverin’ no telegram to Sugar Valley.”

Doc took a swig of the pop. Someway it didn’t taste quite right. Maybe that was because he was remembering Mary Gregg’s eyes and how she’d lost her young husband a short while back.

The depot agent got to his feet.

“Got to be gettin’ along,” he growled. “Night train’s due soon. That telegram was from a Mrs. Crafton in Junction. Said she’d arrive on the mornin’ train.”

Dooley hobbled out, and Doc returned to his bottle of pop. The Craftons, if he remembered rightly, were a tight-fisted old couple with too much money. Doc had little use for money.

Some winks went around the room behind his back, and Cy Pulley cleared his throat.

“Sheriff MacLoyd,” he said loudly, “is the smartest swapper in Bluff County.”

Doc choked on a swallow of pop. Everybody in the room grinned happily, for Doc was reacting true to form.

“Yes, sir!” Cy went on. “The sheriff swapped a span of mules and a broken down wagon fer that ole cabin and five acres at the edge of town.”

Doc slammed the bottle down hard on the counter. He’d been dickering for that cabin himself. Not that he wanted it, but because he knew MacLoyd had his eye on it. Anything the sheriff wanted, Doc was sure to try to get.

More sly winks went around the room.

“MacLoyd’s a real swapper!” Goop Gibson declared.

“Phooey!” Doc snorted. “MacLoyd’s a fat-headed ole fool!”

“Yeah?” Wes Shotwell, the blacksmith grinned. “Why don’t yuh swap him outa that cabin?”

“Don’t want it,” Doc mumbled.

“Heh, heh!” Goop Gibson laughed hoarsely, remembering how Doc had wrangled him out of a case of pop with a shotgun that had a kinked barrel. “Yuh’re just shootin’ off yore mouth, Doc. Yuh couldn’t swap him fer that cabin.”

Doc felt his face burn and his anger rise. Besides, his reputation as a swapper was being questioned. He pulled his fancy pearl-

gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered the deal one of the highlights of his career—clear down to the tips of his red ears. He glared about the room.

"Lis'n, yuh loco herd of bums," he fumed, "I got a ole Jersey cow I could swap MacLoyd fer that cabin an' the five acres without half tryin'!"

"Mighty hefty braggin', Doc," Cy Pulley said.

Doc pointed a shaking fat finger at Cy.

"If I don't swap that cow fer the cabin, I'll eat my hat!"

"Without salt an' pepper?" Goop Gibson grinned.

That was the last straw. With a snort, Doc turned and slammed through the batwings. He was so riled that he'd even left three swallows of pop in the bottle.

OUTSIDE in the cool night air, he began to calm down. He realized then that he had made some mighty big talk. By morning, Sheriff MacLoyd would likely be informed of his, Doc's, boast, and then the sheriff would be a hard man to handle. Doc, cussing softly, guessed that for once he had stuck his neck out a good mile and the ax was about to fall.

In the distance, the night passenger whistled, but Doc didn't hear it. His eyes were fastened on a yellow gleam fighting to get through the grimy, fly-specked window of the jail office. That light told him that the sheriff was still up and around. Doc reckoned that right now was the time to get the swap under way before someone told MacLoyd what was up.

Wheezing like a leaky steam engine, Doc climbed the three wooden jail steps and shoved into the two-by-four office. MacLoyd sat at his spur-scarred desk, working at a monthly report and eating crackers and cheese. He lifted his pale eyes and eyed Doc with unhidden disapproval.

"I'm a busy man—" he began.

Doc swished off his fancy hat and wiped the sweat from his bald head.

"Yuh're one of the smartest cowmen in the country!"

MacLoyd almost choked on a cracker crumb at this unexpected bit of praise. Then a suspicious gleam came to his eyes.

"Shore, I am." he admitted readily. "But—so what?"

"Remember that fine Jersey cow of mine? The one that gives practically nothin' but cream?"

"Gives practically nothin'—period!" MacLoyd snorted. .

Doc ignored the insult and smiled, for he realized that this deal would require considerable tact.

"Sheriff," he said, "yuh're allus gettin' off somethin' funny. Heh, heh!"

MacLoyd's eyes bugged. Doc should have gotten mad, but here he was, laughing at the sheriff's joke. Feeling a touch of confusion, MacLoyd pulled out a hunk of cut plug and took a bite.

"I'm worried about yuh bein' so underweight," Doc went on quickly. "Nothin' like Jersey cream to put meat on a man."

MacLoyd uncrossed his bony, bowed legs and sent a stream of brown juice into a battered spittoon.

His mind was in a whirl, for never before had Doc Swap been interested in his health.

"Yuh wouldn't be thinkin' of givin' me yore cow?" he said cautiously.

Doc nodded soberly. "Yuh guessed it."

MacLoyd ran a long finger over his thin, sunburned nose. He was still confused, but now he began to smell the faint odor of a very dead rat.

"I figured I'd give yuh that cow," Doc went on blandly. "Howsomever, you bein' a upright and just citizen, yuh'd likely want to give me somethin' in return. Mebbe, that

cabin—”

Doc stopped short. Somehow, he realized, he'd made the wrong approach, for there could be no mistaking that swapping gleam, which had leaped into MacLoyd's pale eyes.

The sheriff's bony face took on a pleased smile.

“What,” he asked carelessly, “are yuh offerin' to boot?”

“To boot!” Doc looked shocked. “That cow is the best—”

“Hoss-reddish!” MacLoyd exploded. “She don't give enough milk to cover the bottom of a .45 shell case!”

Doc slapped on his fancy hat, opened his mouth to make a hot retort, but changed his mind. He had to be careful. He couldn't afford to rile the sheriff at this point, for Doc's reputation as a swapper was at stake.

MacLoyd's grin widened. Nothing he liked better than to get Doc on the short end of a deal.

“Now,” he went on, “if you was to throw in yore team of bays an' yore fiddle—”

THAT was insult added to injury, and Doc's white whiskers bristled like the quills on a spooked porcupine. He threw tactfulness overboard and doubled his fat fists.

“Why, yuh dad-blasted ole lop-eared—”

Doc could never talk when he was riled beyond a certain point.

MacLoyd folded his long arms and rocked happily back and forth.

“Not that yore fiddle is worth shucks, but—”

A timid rap at the door stopped him. He unloaded his cud and shoved to his feet.

“Kinda late fer callers,” he frowned.

He shuffled to the door and opened it.

“Don't see nobody— Hey, what's this?”

Doc saw him stoop and reach through the door. When he turned, he held a large basket in one bony hand.

“Must be a present,” he murmured. “Likely some hombre I done a favor fer has brought me some home-cooked food.”

Doc's eyes fixed on the basket. A pink blanket, worn but clean, covered it. The basket, Doc realized with a shock, sure looked mighty familiar.

MacLoyd set the basket on the desk. “Hope it's fried chicken.”

A strange sound came from within the basket, and the sheriff leaped back, jerking his six-gun from the holster.

“There's somethin' alive in it!” he growled.

Doc had stepped up to the basket. Carefully he turned back the pink blanket. A pair of big blue eyes stared up at him out of a chubby pink face.

MacLoyd, looking over Doc's round shoulder, sucked in a quick breath.

“It's a—baby!” he said in an awed voice. “An' there's a note pinned to it.”

Doc had seen the note. His fat hand flashed out and beat MacLoyd's bony fingers to the paper by a half-second.

“Read it,” MacLoyd commanded.

Doc read it, but to himself. The note said,

“Sheriff: I expected Mrs. Crafton to get Susie tonight, but she won't arrive until morning. I can't stay in town all night, or come back in the morning, so I'm leaving Susie with you. Please see that Mrs. Crafton gets her in the morning.

Mary Gregg.”

“Well,” MacLoyd scowled, “what's it say?”

“Tush, tush,” Doc murmured unhappily.

But all the time the wheels in his head were spinning like dry leaves in a tornado. He was remembering the poverty of the Gregg shack. The hopeless look on Mary Gregg's face when he'd traded her the basket. He reckoned that Mary had decided it would be best for her baby to let someone else have her. He also guessed that Mary

had left the baby for the sheriff to pass on to Mrs. Crafton because Mary was afraid that by morning she couldn't go through with giving up her child. And Mary hadn't had the courage to face the sheriff tonight, a man whom she didn't know. And at that point in his thinking, Doc had an inspiration.

"Why," he murmured, "the note don't say nothin' much. Just that somebody has give yuh a baby."

A horrified expression leaped into MacLoyd's face.

"Give me a baby! Who?"

Doc shook his head. "No tellin'. It just says, 'I'm givin' yuh my baby. Please be good to her'."

"Her?"

"It's a girl." Doc pretended to read on.

"Please be good to her an' feed her pure, rich milk. Her name's Susie."

"Susie!"

"Goo," Susie Gregg said, and kicked at the pink blanket.

The sheriff jumped as if someone had swatted him with a handful of cactus.

"Doc," he said hoarsely, "nobody can give me a baby! Especially a girl baby!"

Doc Swap carefully folded the note and put in into a pocket.

"Why not?" he asked innocently. "Ain't you the sheriff? Ain't it a sheriff's duty to pecter the innocent an'—"

"I won't keep her. I'll—"

"What'll people think? You, a public servant, refusin' to give shelter to a innocent baby! Why, they'll say, yuh're a hard-hearted ole buzzard who oughta be hoss-whipped."

MacLoyd's eyes blinked rapidly as he tried to get a clear picture of the situation.

"Waaw!" Susie Gregg burst out suddenly.

MACLOYD backed against the wall, his bony fingers unconsciously dropping to the butt of his six-gun. All his

thinking was cluttered up by that wail.

"Waaw, waaw!" Susie screamed, and got one small foot from under the blanket.

"Reckon I'll be amblin' home," Doc, murmured, heading for the door.

MacLoyd blocked the way. His pale eyes were wide and full of terror.

"Yuh can't leave me alone with that," he panted. "Her bawlin' like a bull with a burr under his tail."

"Feed her," Doc said wisely, "an she'll likely stop."

"Feed her what?"

"Why, some good, rich Jersey milk. Now, if you'd swap—"

Dark suspicion leaped into MacLoyd's face. He stepped forward and laid both hands on the edge of the basket.

"Ah, ha!" he said. "So that's yore game, yuh schemin' ole baboon! Doc, let me have a look at that note. I don't—"

His voice choked off in a frightened gurgle, and his eyes got a wild look in them. Susie had stopped crying, but she'd wrapped a small hand about one of the sheriff's bony fingers. MacLoyd forgot there had ever been a note.

"Help, Doc!" he yelled. "She grabbed me!"

"Waaw!" Susie said again, and let go of the finger.

"Doc," MacLoyd said hoarsely, "do somethin' quick!"

Smiling happily, Doc lifted the basket and rocked it gently. Susie stopped crying and studied him thoughtfully.

"I reckon there's only one thing to do," Doc said. "Take her to my place an' give her some of that good Jersey milk. Since she's yores, sheriff, yuh'll have to come along."

Smiling behind his ragged whiskers, Doc headed for the door with the basket over his arm. He reckoned that Susie Gregg had saved the day for him. MacLoyd, looking like a whipped dog, trailed along

behind.

In the neat white cottage, Doc, remembering back to the days when he'd been right handy at taking care of some nieces and nephews, took charge. He found a bottle in the basket, filled it with Jersey milk and turned Susie loose on it. Her stomach well filled, she immediately went to sleep. .

"Reckon I'll be goin' now," Sheriff MacLoyd murmured.

"Yuh'll have to take yore baby with yuh," Doc told him.

MacLoyd, his face losing color, dropped down on a chair.

"I reckon I'll just stay here," he groaned.

During the night, Doc did a heap of thinking, and he realized that he had two tough problems on his hands. The lesser of the two was to swap MacLoyd a cow for the cabin. The real problem, however, was little Susie Gregg.

Whenever Doc Swap had a problem to solve, there was just one thing for him to do—go to Sugar Valley on a swapping spree. Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were traders. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind.

After breakfast the next morning, the old swapper slapped on his fancy hat and started for the door.

"Where yuh goin'?" MacLoyd demanded in a frightened voice.

"To Sugar Valley," Doc told him.

"Yuh can't go away an' leave me with a baby on my hands!" the sheriff bleated.

"Yuh don't have to keep her," Doc said coldly. "Yuh could try to give her to somebody. 'Course people are goin' to do some talkin' about how yuh're shirkin' yore duty, but—"

"I can't keep her," MacLoyd said hoarsely. "She'd starve."

"Yuh could swap me fer that Jersey cow of mine."

MacLoyd's bony face hardened.

"I know what I'll do," he said suddenly. "I'll take Susie an' go with yuh."

Inwardly, Doc gloated. This was the thing he'd been working for all along, but he shook his head slowly.

"We wouldn't have nothin' to feed her."

MacLoyd grinned evilly and got to his feet.

"Simple," he said. "We'll just tie yore Jersey on behind yore wagon. Go hook up yore hosses. Susie an' me are goin' along, an' that's that!"

GRINNING, Doc waddled to the barn, harnessed his team of fat, sleek bays and hooked them to the old covered wagon in which he carried his swappin' goods. Then he put a halter on the old Jersey and tied her to the rear of the wagon.

MacLoyd, carrying the basket as if it held a bushel of dynamite, came out from the cottage, put the basket into the wagon and climbed up on the high spring seat beside Doc. By now, the sheriff was feeling right proud of himself. He reckoned he'd put one over on Doc Swap, making him take Susie along.

Also, going to Sugar Valley for a few days would keep the people of Dry Bluffs from knowing that he, the sheriff of Bluff County, had an infant on his hands. By the time they got back, he reasoned hopefully, Susie's mother might have a change of heart and want her child back, and all would be well.

"I reckon," he said, "we oughta drive by the jail an' tell Ham Brady that I'll be outa town a few days."

Doc shook out the lines, and the bays moved forward.

"There's a little matter of grub fer us, too," Doc said. While I'm tellin' Ham, yuh can go acrost to Ed Brackett's store an' buy us some groceries."

"Now, lis'n," MacLoyd protested, "I ain't a-goin' to buy no grub fer a ole fat

coyote like you.”

“Then yuh can climb right outa my wagon with yore baby an’ head down the street on foot, yuh tight-fisted ole—”

“Shh!” MacLoyd hissed, his eyes whipping anxiously about. “Not so loud, Doc. I’ll buy them groceries, all right.”

Doc pulled up in front of the jail and wrapped the lines about the brake handle.

“Susie’s asleep,” he said, “so yuh can leave her here.”

He climbed to the ground and headed into the jail office.

MacLoyd shot a worried glance at the basket under the shade of the canvas wagon cover, then climbed carefully to the ground. He headed for Ed Brackett’s general store, swearing at every step. He didn’t mind buying grub for himself, but it burned him up to know that he had to feed Doc, too.

Doc found Deputy Ham Brady pacing nervously about the two-by-four office.

“Can’t find hide nor hair of the sheriff,” Ham said. “The ole fool just up an’ disappeared last night.”

Doc explained MacLoyd’s absence, being careful not to mention Susie, and he said that the sheriff would be out of town for a couple of days. Then he told Ham to meet the morning passenger and tell a Mrs. Crafton, who’d likely get off the train, that Mary Gregg had changed her mind.

“Changed her mind about what?” Ham wanted to know.

“She’ll understand,” Doc said, turning toward the door.

“Wait a minute,” Ham called. He reached behind the desk and came up with a gallon jug. “Ole man Whittle brought the sheriff another gallon of applejack. Mebbe MacLoyd’d like to take it with him.”

Doc took the jug. It was heavy. Whistling softly, he headed back to the covered wagon. He reckoned this was one jug of applejack that Sheriff MacLoyd wouldn’t drink.

A few minutes later, Doc and the sheriff were heading along the Sugar Creek Trail with Susie sleeping soundly in her basket, quite unaware of the part she was playing in Doc’s scheme. As for MacLoyd, he was both angry and worried. Angry because of the cash he’d parted with for the armload of groceries. Worried because he wasn’t quite sure where he stood now that he had a baby on his hands. But one thing he did know, he was going to play his cards mighty close to his chest until this baby business was settled. The next election wasn’t too far away, and he didn’t want people getting the idea that he was a hard-hearted hombre who would chuck an infant out in the cold.

IN THE middle of the morning, they drove up to Ad Trotter’s tar-papered shack. Ad, an old bachelor, sat in his creaky rocking chair under the scanty shade of the one unhappy oak that stood in his grassless yard. His bleary eyes shifted from Doc, who was climbing from the covered wagon, to the Jersey tied on behind. Sheriff MacLoyd remained hidden beneath the canvas, casting baleful, yet somewhat tender, looks at Susie, whose blue eyes were fixed admiringly on his tin star.

“Doc,” Ad said, “fer once, yuh got somethin’ I really want. That Jersey cow.”

That stopped Doc flatfooted. He shook his head quickly.

“Got somethin’ better’n cow’s milk to drink,” he said, and lifted the jug of applejack from the wagon.

For the first time, MacLoyd noticed the jug.

“Say,” he whispered hoarsely, “ain’t that one of my jugs of—”

“Goo,” Susie said, and fastened her hand around one of his bony fingers.

The sheriff’s face turned both red and pleased, and he forgot all about the jug. Doc lugged it back to Ad Trotter.

Ad’s leathery face lit up like a full

moon. Right away, he lost all interest in the cow.

Doc drove a hard bargain. For the applejack he got a chicken coop and four hens, a young pig, a side of bacon and a roll of rusty barbed wire to boot. Not that Doc had any need for the wire, but he never made a swap without getting something to boot.

When he returned to his wagon, he found Susie cutting a tooth on the sheriff's tin star and gurgling happily.

"Must be mighty hungry to want to eat my star," MacLoyd said worriedly.

Doc studied the situation over and decided MacLoyd might be right. So when they came to a shady spot near the creek, he stopped, and with the aid of the Jersey, saw to it that Susie had a satisfying meal. Further complications arose, but Doc was equal to the occasion. Using MacLoyd's large red bandanna and a couple of safety pins, he fixed everything up in a fairly satisfactory manner. By the time they came to Ike Johnson's homestead, Susie was again sleeping peacefully.

Doc found Ike smoking a blackened corn cob pipe and staring unhappily at an empty wire spool and his unfinished garden fence.

"Beats all," Ike said mournfully, "how much wire it takes to keep cattle out of a man's garden so's his wife'll be contented to hoe an' weed it."

"Shore does," Doc agreed. "An' wire is sometimes hard to come by. Lucky I got some for my own garden. A whole roll of it. A mite rusty, but stout as all get-out."

Again Doc drove a hard bargain, swapping the roll of rusty wire for three hens, an old set of harness, a bushel of potatoes and an old washing machine wringer to boot.

"Never seed yuh so hard to dicker with," Ike complained.

"Got reasons to dicker hard," Doc said, gathering up his loot.

By the time Doc and his companions came to the shade along Sugar Creek, it was noon. Also, Susie was wide awake again.

"Waaw!" she said, her face red and distorted, with anger.

MacLoyd, his face somewhat pale, leaned over the basket and said,

"Nice baby. Gets-ya-goo."

"Waaw!" Susie bellowed louder than ever.

"She's a-sayin'," Doc said wisely, "that she wants to chew on yore tin star while yuh're gettin' our dinner."

Doc was right. The tin star turned the trick, and MacLoyd, a pleased look on his bony face, allowed that Susie was right smart to make her wants known at such an early age.

DINNER over, they drove on. A trail branched off to the right, and Doc, thinking of the old washing machine wringer, reined his fat bays along the narrow trail. Presently they came to Homer Prutt's place.

Homer, besides being a bachelor and a farmer of sorts, invented things, none of which ever worked. At the moment, he sat on his doorstep, his pointed chin cupped in his hands, his red-rimmed eyes staring off into space.

When Doc ambled up to him, the inventor let out a deep sigh and got slowly to his feet.

"Homer," Doc observed, "yuh look lower'n a snake in a rut."

Homer nodded his shaggy head. "Feel low," he returned. "I'm plumb out of inventin' ideas. Might as well be dead."

"Ever think of inventin' somethin' to help the women folks out?" Doc murmured. "Mebbe a contraption to roll out pie dough?"

Homer's eyes brightened. "Doc, yuh sometimes show a streak of genius. I never thought of that."

Doc had lifted the old wringer out of his covered wagon.

"Yuh'll need some rollers," he said cheerfully. "Nothin' better'n rubber rollers to flatten out pie dough."

"How much yuh want fer that?" Homer asked eagerly.

Doc's face fell. "Ain't fer sale. Wringers is hard to find—might do some swappin' though."

For the third time, Doc drove a hard bargain, refusing flatly to consider any of Homer's old inventions as swapping goods. When he finally left Homer Prutt's, he'd added to his loot four more hens, another pig, and a box of puzzles to boot. A trade wasn't a trade without boot.

Shortly before sundown, they arrived at Themistocles Whetstone Zoop's homestead and found things in an uproar. It seemed that Rebecca Zenobia Zoop, six years old and very spoiled, was raising old Ned because she couldn't have her Pa's razor to play with. The box of puzzles made her forget all about the razor.

So Doc returned to the covered wagon without the puzzles, but he was leading a half-grown calf by a rope. Also, he had a red rooster, a clean white sheet and a lady's hat, very fancy, even if it was outdated by some ten years.

That night they made camp at Doc's favorite spot on the right bank of Sugar Creek. While MacLoyd cooked supper, Doc proceeded to divide the sheet into several large but serviceable squares. As he worked, he took stock of the day's accumulations. For the sheriff's jug of applejack, he now had a chicken coop with eleven hens and a rooster in it, two pigs, a side of bacon, an old set of harness, a bushel of potatoes, a calf and a very fancy woman's hat. Also, he had a much torn-up sheet.

But as yet he hadn't swapped the cow to the sheriff for the cabin and the five acres of land at the edge of Dry Bluffs. He frowned at the white squares in his hands. If he didn't make that swap, he reckoned the whole town would have the laugh on him. But there was one ray of hope. Susie! With Susie on the sheriff's hands, anything might happen.

The middle of the next morning found them driving up in front of Dog-ears Dover's place. Dog-ears had moved in from Missouri, bringing along his assortment of twenty-one dogs and a hopeful trust in a future without work. His dogs set up a howl, and he came to the door of his cabin.

Doc, sliding down from the wagon, reckoned he'd never seen Dog-ears looking so sad.

"Right fine day," he observed cheerfully.

Dog-ears cursed heavily. "Would be, mebbe, if me an' the Widow Bates hadn't of had us a fallin' out last night."

Doc's face filled with deep sympathy. "Women," he said, "can allus be made happy with presents. Somethin' purty like this."

He reached into the wagon and came up with the fancy hat, and Dog-ears' seamy face lost its scowl.

When Doc drove away, Dog-ears Dover was gazing fondly at the hat, which he held in his horny hands. Doc had added to his collection a fair horse, three cans of pork and beans, a pound of coffee and a mangy, long-eared pup to boot.

Sheriff. MacLoyd glared at the old swapper.

"Doc," he said, "yuh oughta be hung! The Widow Bates'll take one look at that hat an' wham' it in Dog-ears' face."

Doc was saved from making a reply by Susie, who at that moment let out a demanding squawk. The sheriff forgot his indignation in this new worry. They stopped

in the shade, and Doc set the sheriff to milking the cow while he got out one of the squares he'd torn from the sheet. When MacLoyd had finished milking, Doc returned the red bandanna to him. The sheriff took it with some misgivings and doubt.

EARLY that afternoon, Doc drove his bays up to Ed Lunt's homestead. Here, by some fast and slick talking, he traded off the pup, which had taken the eye of Ed's youngest boy. For the pup, he got a cured ham, five jars of home-canned peaches and an assortment of garden seed to boot. Shortly after that, he drove his outfit up to the small, miserable cabin which Mary Gregg and her late husband had hoped to make into a home.

Mary Gregg was a small, thin girl, clean but poorly dressed. She brushed back her brown hair with a work-hardened hand and looked at Doc out of eyes that were red from crying.

Doc swept off his fancy Stetson and bowed deeply.

"Right handsome weather," he observed.

Mary said nothing.

"Heard in a roundabout way," he went on, "that yuh figured Susie'd be better off if yuh let the Craftons in Junction have her."

Mary began to cry in a hopeless, heartbreaking way.

"I didn't know what else to do with her," she sobbed. "I used to work for the Craftons, and I didn't know anyone around here to ask."

Doc wasn't the kind who could stand to see anyone cry. He reached into the wagon and, with the sheriff watching him goggle-eyed, lifted out the basket and Susie.

Mary Gregg let out a little cry and ran forward. She caught up Susie, basket, tin star and all and held her tight.

"Susie," she said over and over, "I didn't want to give you away!" Then she looked

up at Doc and began to cry again. "But I can't keep her. I don't have anything—"

"Why," Doc said blandly, "it seems all yore neighbors has sent some stuff that oughta help yuh out. Here's a hoss and some harness. A calf. Two pigs. Some cured meat. Chickens. Coffee, beans, peaches, garden seed an'—"

"But," Mary said, "I don't even have a home. I've got to give this place up and get out tomorrow."

Doc blinked rapidly. Here was an unexpected complication, but he was equal to the occasion. He glared up at Sheriff MacLoyd, who sat very stiff and straight on the spring seat, his bony face white and set, his pale eyes fixed on Susie, who was chewing contentedly on his tin star.

"Ever'body," Doc said so only the sheriff could hear, "has helped Mary an' Susie but you, yuh stingy ole hoss-thief! Now, if yuh had somethin' to give 'em—say a Jersey cow—so's Susie would all us be sure of good rich milk—"

The sheriff squirmed, for Susie, her blue eyes wide and round, was smiling up at him and gurgling in a friendly way.

"Mebbe," he whispered hoarsely, "yuh'd sell me that cow."

"I'd swap her for that cabin an' five acres," Doc said.

MacLoyd took another look at Susie. She was as cute as a kitten. Smart, too. She smiled at him and banged the old tin star on the basket. Nobody could resist that smile.

The sheriff nodded his bony head, climbed down from the wagon, untied the Jersey and led her over to Mary Gregg.

"Thank you," Mary said, but the deep worry was still on her young face.

"Everyone is awfully kind—but I can't keep these things. I don't have a home now, and—"

"I reckon I can fix that," Doc said quickly. "I own a little cabin an' some land right close to town. Just swapped fer it. Yuh

can move in there an' stay as long as yuh like. With yore chickens an' pigs an' a little gardenin', along with some work yuh can pick up in town, you an' Susie will make out right well."

That evening, old Doc Swap, sitting in the front room of his neat little cottage, reckoned he was in a lot better fiddling trim than he'd been two nights ago. The more he played, the better the red-gold fiddle sounded. Maybe that was because he was

remembering the grateful and happy look on Mary Gregg's face.

Also, he was remembering that he'd swapped Sheriff MacLoyd an old cow for a cabin and five acres of land.

"Pop! goes the weasel," the old fiddle sang.

Doc smiled contentedly, while his sock feet stamped out the time on the bare floor, and the furniture fairly danced all over the room.