

DOC SWAP'S Watch Chain Wallop

By BEN FRANK

Sheriff MacLoyd wouldn't trade his new fiddle bow for a bull calf—but for the answer to a murder riddle, he'd dicker!

OLD DOC SWAP cussed through his ragged white whiskers as he glared at the letter. This letter suggested that he buy shares in the proposed irrigation project, and Doc Swap was a trader, not a buyer. He slammed the letter down on the dining room table and waddled angrily to the front door of his neat white cottage which stood on the edge of Dry Bluffs.

Then he remembered Sheriff MacLoyd's new fiddle bow and forgot the letter. Two things Doc and the sheriff were bitter rivals in—fiddle playin' and swappin'. And now Doc had a feeling that he couldn't get through the day unless he got his fat fingers on the new bow which the sheriff had bought through a mail-order music house.

"Dad blast the dad-blasted—"

Doc's voice died in his throat, for he saw Jimmy Jordon riding toward the cottage on his lanky roan. And suddenly Doc felt a new worry. Doc liked the kid and wanted to see him get a break, but the scowl on Jimmy's brown face told Doc that the kid was still down on his luck.

Jimmy slid to the ground, a long, lean, level-eyed young man, and spur-jingled his way to Doc's deep well. The kid whipped off his big hat and mopped back his reddish hair.

"Doc, I could go for a drink of water," he said.



A bloody hammer lay near
Old Luke's head

"All yuh got to do is pump," Doc returned. Jimmy began to work the pump handle viciously.

"So they laughed at yuh?" Doc

murmured.

"Yeah." Bright anger flared in the kid's eyes. "Old man Slater at the bank. Deacon Stout. Even old Luke Stephens!"

Doc started. "Why Luke Stephens?"

"Everybody knows he's got money," Jimmy said bitterly. "I hit him up for a loan, but he was just like the rest. Even followed me outside to kid me about newfangled ideas."

"Do tell?" Doc murmured, thinking of Luke.

Luke Stephens, an oldish hombre who ran a harness and boot shop and crippled around on crutches, had moved in some three years before, set up his business and had never said "boo" about himself or his past. However, if it hadn't been for the iron safe in his shop, likely no one would have given him much thought. But that iron safe had a lot of people guessing. Gossips said that Luke kept a sizeable stack of money in that safe, although no one had ever seen any of it.

Jimmy dropped down on the well curb. "Short-sighted fools!" he exploded. "That's what they are, Doc. All they can talk about is irrigation just because a city slicker like Milton Manzel is promoting the idea. They can't see that the cheapest and best way of increasing production here is to introduce rotation of crops, bring in some blooded stock and—"

"People is naturally suspicious of new ideas," Doc reminded.

Jimmy sighed deeply. "If I had the money, I'd show 'em!"

Doc gave the kid a comforting pat on the shoulder, tightened his own fancy pearl-gray Stetson over his shiny bald head—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered this one of the highlights of his career—and waddled away along Dry Bluffs' one street.

He had a hunch that the kid was right.

Jimmy had been away to agriculture college and had picked up what Doc considered to be some right sound ideas about farming and ranching. The only trouble, Jimmy couldn't finance his ideas, for when old man Jordon had died, he'd left his son nothing but a rundown farm and a parcel of debts.

THE old swapper swore softly and headed for the sun-warped, crackerbox jail. In spite of the irritating letter and Jimmy's troubles, Doc hadn't forgotten the sheriff's new fiddle bow. As shiny as a mirror, it was. Springy as tempered steel. And gold trimmed!

Doc had a right fair fiddle bow of his own, but anything MacLoyd owned, Doc was sure to want. For forty years, the old swapper and MacLoyd had been trying to get each other on the short end of a trade and now—

"Fine day," a deep, pleasant voice said, and Doc skidded to a halt, for the voice belonged to Milton Manzel, the promoter of the proposed irrigation project.

His eyes went over Manzel, not missing a trick. Expensive store clothes. A slick, black derby hat. String tie. Heavy gold watch chain gleaming across a silk vest. And a big roll of paper under his left arm. The papers, Doc surmised, must be the plans for the proposed dam across Sugar Creek.

"If you're not too busy," Milton Manzel smiled, "I'd like to talk to you."

Doc cast a longing glance toward the jail. He reckoned that Sheriff MacLoyd and the fiddle bow would have to wait, for Manzel was a stranger in town, and Doc didn't like to miss a chance to pow-pow with a stranger. Never could tell what you might get in a swap with a stranger.

"Might spare a few minutes," he said cautiously.

Mr. Manzel's smile became a

mouthful of gleaming teeth.

"We could go to my house," Doc suggested.

"Fine," Manzel said.

Puffing along beside the promoter, Doc wondered what he might swap to Manzel for a share of irrigation stock, not that Doc wanted the stock, but nothing he liked better than to do some fancy trading. When they came to the cottage, Doc saw that Jimmy Jordon had gone.

They went inside, and Manzel spread the large sheets of papers on the dining room table. Doc didn't understand half of what he saw, but he had to admit that Manzel was a right good salesman. In fact, Doc almost found himself willing to pay cash for a share of the stock. Almost, but not quite. Instead, he offered to trade an old rifle for a share.

That was a mistake. Manzel began to roll up the papers with quick, angry motions that made his gold watch chain jingle and glitter.

"I'm a business man, not a swapper," he said hotly.

He put on his derby and departed. Doc felt his round fat face turning red. It wasn't often that he failed to put over a deal.

"Biggity cuss," lie growled. "Bet his scheme's a fake."

Again remembering the fiddle bow, he clamped his fancy hat back on his bald head and once more waddled toward the jail. This time he made it. He stamped up the three wooden steps and shoved into the two-by-four office.

MacLoyd wasn't in. Doc snorted. Everything was going wrong this morning. First, the letter. Then Jimmy Jordon's trouble. The hoped-for swap with Mr. Manzel. And now—

Doc's eyes fixed on the sheriff's fiddle case. He crossed the room, opened the case somewhat nervously, for MacLoyd was right touchy about his fiddle, and

stared in open fascination at the new, gold-trimmed bow.

After a cautious glance about, he lifted the bow from the case and ran his pudgy fingers along the smooth, shiny stick. Mighty pretty. With a bow like that, a man ought to make a fiddle talk. Especially a red-gold fiddle like Doc's, for Doc reckoned he had the best dad-blasted fiddle this side of—

"Put up that bow, yuh fat ole goat!"

Doc whirled. MacLoyd, his pale eyes blazing, his long, bony face fury-filled, swayed back and forth in the doorway on his number twelve boots.

"Who do yuh think you are, comin' here an' makin' yoreself to home with my fiddle bow?" the sheriff roared.

MacLoyd's bellowing didn't worry Doc in the least. The thing that worried him was being caught admiring the bow. Realizing that Doc wanted the bow, MacLoyd was sure to be a hard man to dicker with, and Doc knew it. He blinked unhappily and tried to think of something to say.

"Yuh've likely busted it," MacLoyd raved on, "since yuh wouldn't know which end to hold on to!"

Doc felt a stir of anger. He was right proud of his fiddling know-how.

"Can't a man look at somethin' he wants to swap for without an old bean-pole like you blowin' yore—"

His voice choked off, and he felt the cold sweat pop out on his face. Being first to bring up the subject of swapping was a serious tactical error. Doc knew that from bitter experience gained during the many years he and the sheriff had been swapping.

The anger in MacLoyd's eyes was replaced instantly by another gleam. The old swapping gleam. He dropped down on his swivel chair, bit off a huge chew of cut-plug and began to rock back and forth.

This was a bad sign, and Doc knew it. Immediately he pretended to lose all interest in the bow. But inwardly he was squirming, for MacLoyd had him across a barrel.

"Just dropped in for a chat," he murmured.

A wicked gleam spread over the sheriff's thin face.

"Phooey! Yuh want that bow, an' I—" Footsteps clattered on the wooden porch, and Willie Bean, a towheaded kid, flung into the room.

"Sheriff," he panted. "Ham Brady sent me for yuh! Old man Stephens has been murdered. Somebody hit him over the head with a hammer, an'—"

MacLoyd reared up to his six feet of skin and bones and dived through the door. Doc followed. A minute later, puffing like two longhorn bulls after a three hour battle, the two old-timers shoved through the crowd that had collected about Luke Stephens' harness and boot shop and stumbled into the cluttered workroom. Ham Brady, MacLoyd's deputy, stood at the door, seeing to it that the crowd didn't follow.

OLD LUKE lay on the floor behind the workbench, his crippled legs tangled with a set of harness. A bloody hammer lay near his head. And his head wasn't nice to look at. Doc shuddered and turned his eyes away.

"I just happened to come in to see about gettin' my bridle fixed," Ham chattered, "an' there he was!"

Doc looked at Ham. The deputy was visibly shaken, for cold-blooded murder was uncommon in Dry Bluffs.

"The safe's open," Ham wheezed, "an' everything's scattered like a cyclone hit it!"

MacLoyd made a cursory examination of the safe; then straightened, his pale eyes

as big as door knobs.

"Must've kilt him for his money!" he bleated.

Suddenly he stooped and scooped up something off the floor. His eyes leaped to Doc's fat face as he shoved the object into a pocket. He said nothing, but from then on, Doc found himself filled with a mighty uneasy feeling.

After finding nothing that pointed to the identity of the murderer, they went outside, and MacLoyd asked the onlookers if they'd seen anyone go into the shop that morning. A few had seen Jimmy Jordon go in, but Luke had followed him outside, so that seemed to put Jimmy in the clear. Also, this established the time of the murder between when Jimmy had left the shop and when Ham Brady had found Luke's body—a matter of forty-five minutes.

Someone called MacLoyd's attention to the open back door, and the sheriff scowled and nodded his bony head. Then he turned on Doc.

"Let's go over to my office and talk," he growled.

Doc's uneasiness grew as he waddled along beside the skinny sheriff. Once inside the dingy office, MacLoyd kicked the door shut, reached into a pocket and pulled out the object he'd picked up near the safe. It was a letter.

"Ever see this before, Doc?" he grated.

Doc had.

"Got it in the mornin' mail," he replied. "Left it on my dinin' room table." He shot a quick look at the sheriff. "You ain't dumb enough to think I killed Luke an' then left my own letter there for you to find, are yuh?"

"Course not, you old fool. You ain't bright, but you wouldn't leave that letter behind if you killed Luke, I reckon. What I wanta know, Doc, who was in yore house this mornin' and picked up this letter and

then left it here, maybe hopin' to throw suspicion on you?"

Immediately Doc remembered Jimmy Jordon and the bitterness on his young face when he'd talked about Luke Stephens. Jimmy could have taken the letter, for Doc had left him alone at the cottage. Jimmy could have gone into Luke's shop through the rear door—and then Doc remembered Milton Manzel.

To save his soul, Doc couldn't remember whether or not the letter had been on the table when Manzel had spread out the plans for the irrigation project. He whipped off his fancy hat, scratched his bald head and said nothing.

"Well," MacLoyd roared, "a cat got yore tongue?"

Doc didn't want to tell MacLoyd about Jimmy and Manzel, for the hot-headed old sheriff was a great hand to jump to conclusions. Like as not, MacLoyd would throw both Jimmy and Manzel in jail, raise a big rumpus and fail to find any evidence against either of them, and in general, make a fool of himself.

Although Doc wouldn't admit it aloud, he was mighty fond of MacLoyd and didn't want him to make a fool of himself publicly. Besides, Doc wanted to do some thinking on his own, for something about that letter being found in Luke's place had the smell of a dead rat.

"I reckon anybody could've got that letter," he mumbled. "Ain't no hand to lock my house."

MacLoyd's thin lips puckered and sent a dead-centering stream of tobacco juice into the battered spittoon. There followed a fiery string of cuss words.

"Doc," he clipped, "you ain't foolin' me. You got an idea in that feeble mind of your'n, an' I wanta know what it is."

"Might swap you a bull calf for yore fancy, no-good fiddle bow," Doc said, changing the subject. "I'd want some boot,

though."

Red streaks of anger shot up into MacLoyd's face. For the moment, he forgot everything except the insult of Doc's offer.

"Dang my hide!" he roared. "You think I'm a idiot?"

"I know yuh ain't no swapper," Doc said happily.

Once in the street, Doc wasted no time in returning to his cottage. He had to go on a swapping spree through Sugar Valley, and he knew it. Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were swappers. Trading sharpened Doc's mind, helped him think, and he had a heap of thinking to do.

JIMMY JORDON had been miffed at Luke, but Doc couldn't figure the kid as a brutal killer. As for Milton Manzel—Doc shook his head. There seemed to be no reason why a wealthy man like Manzel would murder an old crippled harness maker for money. Then there was that dad-blasted letter.

Why anyone would go to the trouble of stealing the letter to leave beside Luke's safe was more than Doc could understand. Anyone should know that it would take more than that to convince anyone that Doc Swap was a murderer.

Besides that murder hadn't been planned. It had just happened, Doc was sure, for if the murderer had planned ahead to kill Luke, Doc reasoned that he would have taken along his own weapon. The whole business didn't make sense. The old swapper cussed through his whiskers. Yep, the sooner he got to swapping, the better, for problems were piling up on him to beat all get-out.

Twenty minutes later, his sleek bay team hooked to the old covered wagon in which he carried his "swappin' goods", Doc was heading at a rattling pace toward

the valley. He rounded a clump of wind-whipped pines and saw a man hovering over a small campfire. Nearby stood a horse with a few odds and ends of surveying instruments strapped behind a saddle. The man was Milton Manzel, the promoter.

Doc pulled his fat bays to a willing halt and slid to the ground. Manzel, his gold watch chain gleaming, looked up and smiled in a right friendly fashion. Then he stood up and began to scatter the fire with a long stick. A swirl of grayish ashes went flying into the air. To Doc it looked as if the man had used a lot of papers to start that fire.

"Kinda early to be cookin' dinner," Doc observed.

Manzel chuckled. "Wasn't cooking dinner. Just burning some old maps that were taking up more room than they were worth."

He pulled two cigars from an inside pocket, handed one to Doc and put the other into his mouth. :

"Thanks," Doc murmured, slipping the cigar into a pocket.

Manzel let cigar smoke stream from his long, straight nose.

"Going to map out some ditches on the lower side of the Double-X ranch. Guess I'd better be moving on."

Doc watched him ride away and remembered suddenly that he'd failed to talk swap. With a disgusted snort, he waddled to his covered wagon and climbed up on the sagging spring seat, thinking that he must be slipping. Scowling, he drove on along the trail. He made his next stop at Hogback Ridge.

According to Manzel's plans, a dam was to be built across Sugar Creek between Hogback Ridge and Indian Bluff in order to raise the water level of the creek high enough to flow over the ridge and onto the bottom farm lands.

Doc halted his team and wagon in the shade of a lightning-scarred cottonwood which crowned the ridge. His keen eyes swept about. Doc didn't know much about surveying and engineering, but he did know that water wouldn't run uphill. Of course, without instruments, he couldn't be positive that the water level of the creek could, or couldn't be raised as high as the ridge, but the longer he sat there, looking, the stronger his feeling of doubt grew.

"Dad-blast it!" he growled. "Oughta be some way for a jasper like me to figure this business out."

His fat fingers gently touched the cigar in his pocket, and slowly a smile came to his face. The wheels in his head were beginning to turn.

An hour later, Doc pulled his outfit to a stop in front of Dog-ear Dover's ramshackle cabin. Dog-ear had moved in from Missouri with his assortment of some twenty-odd dogs and a desire to work as little as possible. Now, he came to the door of the cabin and blinked up at Doc out of unhappy eyes.

"Dog-ear," Doc observed, "yuh look right put-out."

"Shouldn't be," the man sighed, "fer one o' my dawgs has had herself a litter o' pups. But I miscalculated."

"How's that?" Doc wanted to know.

"Bought cee-gars to hand out in honor of the occasion, but I've give 'em all away. Now I hear that Hammer Howell is acomin' to see the pups, an' I ain't got no cee-gar fer him. Hammer's right sensitive about things like that. He's—"

Dog-ear's voice cracked off, for Doc had pulled a cigar from his pocket. When Doc drove away, Dog-ear had a cigar for Hammer Howell, and Doc had in exchange a yard-stick, a ball of twine, a bantam rooster, and a fancy clay flower pot to boot. Not that Doc figured on raising any indoor flowers, but a swap

wasn't a swap without boot.

DOC circled to the south and in due time arrived at the Zoop homestead. Trouble was afoot here, he knew the moment he waddled up to the front door, for he could hear the spoiled six-year-old Rebecca Zenobia bawling in wild anger. Doc knocked. Mrs. Zoop came to the door.

"Rebecca Zenobia's shore raisin' Cain," Doc observed.

"She takes after her pa," Mrs. Zoop sighed. "Right now she's havin' one of her stubborn spells."

Doc reached into his covered wagon and came up with the bantam rooster. "Kids need pets," he murmured innocently.

Rebecca Zenobia had stopped her ranting and now stood staring at the rooster in deep fascination.

"I want the pretty chicken," she declared; then doubled her small fists and got ready to continue her crying. Her strategy worked. When Doc drove away, she had the rooster. Doc had an old leaky, wooden barrel, two loaves of bread, a fat hen, and three joints of stovepipe. The pipe, of course, was Doc's boot. Also, part of a plan that had formed in his mind.

That noon, Doc made camp on the bank of Sugar Creek under a tall elm. As soon as he had the hen dressed and roasting over a fire, he rolled the old barrel down to the creek and anchored it in the water, figuring that nothing was better for a leaky barrel than a good soaking. He was just getting around to eating when a buggy came rattling along the trail.

Sheriff MacLoyd and Milton Manzel were in the buggy. At the smell of food, MacLoyd's bony nose began to twitch.

"Looks like we're just in time," he observed happily.

Doc gave him a sour scowl. "In time for what?" he asked coldly.

The happy expression left the sheriff's face. "Now, Doc," he wheedled, "we ain't et since—"

Manzel had pulled a silver dollar from his pocket.

"I'll pay for our dinners," he offered.

Doc had no use for money, and said so. "Mebbe we could figure out a swap," he added. "There's a certain fiddle bow—"

The stony look on MacLoyd's face stopped him. Doc knew there was a point beyond which he could not go, even if the sheriff was hungry. So after considerable wrangling, he fed the two men. In exchange, he got a shovel, a battered feed bucket and a red bandanna from the sheriff.

From Manzel, he got the fancy gold watch chain, but the ease with which this deal was made warned Doc that the chain was mostly brass. A close inspection proved it. Doc's former doubts about the man took a sudden forward spurt, and along with these doubts came a hunch that made the sweat pop out on his fat face.

After the meal was finished, MacLoyd drew Doc to one side. "Thought anymore about that letter?" he hissed.

Looking as innocent as a baby, Doc shook his head. "What're you an' Manzel doin' out here together?"

"I'm a-helpin' him sell stock in this irrigation company by introducin' him to people," MacLoyd answered. "Goin to spend the night in Red-dog, then go—"

"Any ideas yet about who killed old Luke?"

MacLoyd scowled and shook his head. "Whoever done it, must've went in an' out through that back door. Nary a soul seen anyone go in the front way this mornin' between the time Jimmy left an' Ham found Luke dead."

Doc didn't mention the sudden hunch he'd had when he'd taken a good look at the watch chain. He wasn't quite ready for

the hot-headed old sheriff to know about that.

AFTER the sheriff and the promoter had gone on, Doc drove deeper into Sugar Valley. Turning away from the creek, he followed a rutted lane that eventually led up to Mule Turner's homestead. A blind man could have seen that Mule was far behind the eight ball, and Doc wasn't blind.

Ida, Mule's wife and the real power behind the throne, was giving Mule a tongue lashing. Smiling happily, for there was nothing like a family fuss to add spice to a swap, Doc slid to the ground and waddled up to where the couple stood.

"Fine day," Doc greeted cheerfully with a deep bow.

Ida turned flaming eyes on Doc. "Fine, phooey!" she snapped. "Mule, the awkward galoot, just upset my geranium. Busted the pot all to pieces!"

"Flower pots is more or less hard to come by," Doc said sadly as he lifted the clay pot out of his wagon.

Ida turned her burning eyes on the wilted Mule. "I want that flower pot," she said, "an' I don't mean perhaps!"

Mule was at the point where he would have willingly traded off his farm to please Ida, but Doc didn't want a farm. He settled for a dozen eggs, a pound of butter, a hollow glass curtain rod, a fair ax, and two bottle corks to boot. Not that Doc intended to do any bottling, but those corks looked just right to fit into each end of the hollow glass curtain rod.

The old swapper made his next stop at Jimmy Jordon's rundown farm, and found the youngster nursing a sick calf.

"Only thoroughbred stock I got," Jimmy said, "and he's about half dead."

At the moment, Doc had little interest in sick calves.

"Jimmy," he said, "did you kill Luke Stephens?"

The kid leaped to his feet, his eyes popping. "Kill Luke? What're you talking about, Doc?"

Doc told him. He also told about the sheriff finding the letter by Luke's iron safe.

"Jimmy," he finished, "you didn't go into my house an' pick up that letter, did yuh?"

"Gosh, no!" Jimmy exploded. "After I cooled off a little, I came on home. Look, Doc, I really had nothing against Luke. I was just kind of sore because he laughed at me when I told him how I wanted to show these people in Sugar Valley that up-to-date methods would make 'em money, but—"

"Jimmy," Doc grinned, "let's me and you make a deal."

"Sure, Doc, anything you say."

"I want you to ride over to Red-dog tonight an' tell Sheriff MacLoyd to meet me at Hogback Ridge along towards noon tomorrow. Tell him to bring Mr. Manzel along, no matter what. If the bony old coyote puts up any argument about not doin' as I say, tell him he'll lose money if he don't. That'll fetch MacLoyd a-runnin', I reckon. As for you, come over there bright and early in the mornin' for I've got some work for yuh. Also, it'd be a good idea if you'd bring along yore .45. Never know when yuh might meet up with a rattlesnake."

"I'll do it, Doc," Jimmy agreed. "You got me some worried about this murder business. Doc, if I wanted to kill a man, I wouldn't hit him over the head with a hammer. I'd take a gun or a knife and—"

"Smart boy," Doc grinned. "See yuh in the mornin'."

Then his eyes lit on a pile of old mowing machine gears. Doc couldn't pass

up anything like that—even if he hadn't needed them. But now he did need them.

"I'll just take these along," he murmured.

"Help yourself," Jimmy said quickly. "Doc, do you think we can straighten out this murder business?"

"Maybe," Doc answered as he climbed up into his wagon. "On t' other hand, maybe not. Time will tell."

HE HAD one more stop to make, and that was at Homer Prutt's place. On the way, he leaned back in the old spring seat and looked like the cat that had swallowed the canary.

For the cigar which Mr. Manzel had given him, he now had a yardstick, a ball of twine, an old barrel, a loaf of bread, stove pipe, shovel, bucket, red bandanna, a hollow glass tube and two corks to poke into the ends, a dozen eggs, and a pound of butter. Not bad, even if he didn't count the gear wheels which he'd appropriated. Or MacLloyd's fiddle bow, which he hadn't appropriated, but intended to.

However, better than all this, he had a head full of ideas along with a hunch that they were workable. And water wouldn't run uphill, Doc knew that for sure. He was whistling softly when he drove up to Homer's tar-papered shack with the lean-to workshop in back of it.

Homer Prutt, besides being a very poor farmer, was an inventor of contraptions which never worked. During his years in Sugar Valley, he'd collected a horde of odds and ends to use in his various inventions, and there were two of these items which Doc remembered seeing, and now wanted. Homer stood in the doorway of his workshop, eyeing Doc narrowly through thick-lensed glasses. Homer had a deep suspicion that all visitors were hoping to steal his inventions.

"Howdy," he said coldly. "Mighty busy today, Doc. Sorry, but I ain't lookin' to make no swaps with—"

His voice faded away, for Doc had begun to toss gear wheels to the ground. Homer had a weakness for wheels.

"Figured we might do a little business," Doc murmured. "'Course, if yuh don't want to, I'll load these up an'—"

"Hold yore hosses, Doc!" Homer wheezed. "Been kinda aimin' to invent a perpetual motion machine, an' it'll take a lot of wheels for that, I reckon."

Doc shoved past Homer into the workshop. It took him but a moment to find the two items he wanted: an old telescope and camera tripod. However, he was one who always drove a hard bargain in a swap. He ended up by getting not only the telescope and the tripod, but also a ham, a roll of baling wire, a peck of spuds and a gallon of molasses.

Along toward dusk, the old swapper pulled his sleek bays to a stop at the foot of Hogback Ridge and made camp. After he had eaten his supper, he began to dig into his swapping goods.

"Beats all get-out what a hombre can contrive to make outa odds an' ends," he kept muttering as he worked.

When Jimmy Jordon arrived the next morning, Doc put him to work. Along toward noon, Doc stood back and surveyed the results of their labor with a satisfied eye.

"Not bad for a couple of amateurs," he observed.

Jimmy grinned and nodded in agreement. "Guess I'll take a little walk along the creek," he said.

"Keep a sharp lookout for them rattlers," Doc warned. "Never know when yo're likely to meet up with one."

ALL the way from Red-dog to Hogback Ridge, Sheriff MacLoyd alternated cussing Doc Swap with apologizing to Milton Manzel for bringing him on this long, roundabout ride back to Dry Bluffs.

"Doc ain't very bright," he said, "but when he gets his mind set on somethin', you might as well humor him. If you don't, the ole cuss'll run yuh ragged."

He didn't add that the thing that worried him most was Jimmy's reference to losing money. Mr. Manzel was the kind of an hombre you hesitated to talk with concerning the losing of money. Mr. Manzel was a spender. But not MacLoyd.

When they came to the creek and Hogback Ridge, they saw Doc's covered wagon glinting in the noonday sun at the top of the ridge. Doc himself was sitting in the shade, eating a thick slice of bread covered with molasses. He didn't seem to have a care in the world. When they approached the wagon, they saw a tripod nearby with a telescope and a glass rod fastened to it a very firmly by bailing wire.

A twine string reached across the creek from the ridge to Indian Bluff. MacLoyd also noted a number of long poles sticking up along both sides of the creek. To the poles were tied strips torn from a red bandanna. He had a sudden idea that Doc Swap had gone plumb loco. He shot a worried glance at Mr. Manzel.

The tightness about Mr. Manzel's narrowed eyes caused the sheriff no little concern. He figured that the promoter was right put out at being brought all this way just to see a fat, crazy jasper who didn't have anything better to do than stretch a string across a creek.

Doc swallowed the last bite of bread and got to his feet. "Been thinkin' about yore fiddle bow," he announced. "Ain't shore I want to swap that bull calf for it."

MacLoyd blew up, pronto. "Doc," he

raved, "do yuh mean you had us come here so's yuh could talk swap with me? What's all this stuff yuh got strung around here, anyway? Somethin' to keep the woodpeckers from workin' on yore wooden head?"

Doc assumed an expression of deep hurt. "Why, not exactly," he said. "I rigged me up an outfit to do a little surveyin' with. Put water in that glass tube so's to make a fair level outa it. Fastened it to the telescope so's I could tell when I was a-lookin' at things on the level. That string yuh see is about where the top of Mr. Manzel's dam is supposed to be. Them red strips of yore bandanna tied to them poles marks the water level if this here dam was brimful."

Doc pointed a fat finger at the improvised transit level.

"If you got time, sheriff, you might take a peek through that telescope. You'll notice that the water level won't be quite high enough to run over this here ridge. If you want to do some measurin', there's a yardstick. Of course, I ain't no engineer, an' this contraption I rigged up ain't exactly the best jigger in the world for surveyin', but—"

"You said it!" Manzel interrupted. "And you don't know what you're talking about!"

But the sheriff had stepped to the tripod and was squinting through the telescope. He took a long look at the improvised level. He was visibly impressed. Also, he was remembering the shares of stock he'd purchased from Milton Manzel.

"Doc," he asked hoarsely, "what're you gettin' at?"

"I'm tryin' to say that water won't run uphill," Doc said blandly. "Which is merely sayin' in another way that Mr. Manzel is promotin' a fake scheme."

"Sheriff," Manzel said angrily, "this

fat old fool can't prove a thing with that homemade transit level."

Doc ignored that. "Another thing," he went on, "let's suppose I'm wrong an' the dam will lift the water over the ridge, which it won't. But suppose it will, let's see what would happen."

HE CLIMBED up into the covered wagon and began to bail creek water out of the wooden barrel and pour it into the three lengths of stovepipe, which carried the water to a ditch that Jimmy Jordon had dug earlier. The water ran along the ditch a few yards and then began to form a small pond.

"You see," Doc puffed, "the slope is wrong for irrigatin' them bottom lands on t' other side of this ridge. Funny thing—water won't run uphill. Allus wants to follow the path of least resistance. Some people are like that. Instead of takin' the trouble to investigate some fool idea, they're willin' to take a feller's word for it because he wears a fancy gold watch chain. Even if the chain is a fake."

MacLloyd's bony jaw sagged. Then conviction took root. He turned angry, questioning eyes on Milton Manzel.

"All right," the promoter said abruptly. "So my plans are phoney. So what? How'd you two like to be cut in on a good thing? You let me go ahead selling stock, and I'll give you a split. When the stock's sold, I'll clear out. No one will know you two are in on it, and—"

"There's one other little matter," Doc said flatly. "And that's a matter of murder! Don't know as I want to get mixed up with the feller who murdered Luke Stephens."

Manzel's face went a pasty white.

"Even if I didn't know you and Luke was old sidekicks," Doc went on, "I kinda figured it that way." That fake gold chain told me for shore what I'd already guessed—that you was a fake yoreself.

And then I remembered how it'd jingled and sparkled t' other mornin' after I'd tried to swap yuh a gun for a share of yore stock. Right then's when I knowed how that letter of mine got into Luke's place.

"You rolled it up accidental with yore papers! When you killed Luke, you dropped the papers, but that time when you rolled 'em up, you didn't get the letter mixed up with 'em. Bein' in a hurry, you didn't notice—"

Suddenly Manzel whipped a gun from under his coat and leveled it.

"All right," he rasped, "so I did kill Luke. So what? Wasn't anything else for me to do. He'd been mixed up with me in another scheme like this years ago. I tried to kill him then to shut him up. Shoved him over a cliff. Thought the fall killed him until I happened to see him in that harness shop this morning. He was crippled, but plenty alive.

"I knew he'd try to put the bite on me again, so I slipped in the back way and busted him over the head with his own hammer. That safe was open. Found some money in it and some papers and newspapers that would have put me in prison if Luke'd showed 'em to anyone. Took the papers and burned 'em.

"So," Manzel concluded—and the ice in his voice sent a shiver along Doc's spine—"you two hicks won't tell anyone about all this, because you're not going to live long enough!"

"Drop that gun!" a voice said, and Jimmy Jordon stepped out from a clump of bushes.

Manzel took one look at Jimmy's eyes and the .45 he held in his hand, and dropped his own gun.

"You're right, Doc, about running into rattlers around here," the kid grinned.

IT WAS DARK when Sheriff MacLloyd and Doc Swap ambled into the jail

office. They'd just come from a meeting where Jimmy Jordon had explained his ideas for improving farming and ranching in Bluff County to some citizens who had suddenly changed their minds about investing in an irrigation project. Now they were willing to invest in a home town boy—Jimmy Jordon.

Doc felt fine about the whole thing. He lowered himself carefully to a chair and began to fan his smiling face with his fancy Stetson. But suddenly he scowled as he remembered the fiddle bow, and his eyes fixed on the sheriff's wooden fiddle case.

"Might swap—" he began.

MacLoyd leaped wildly to his feet, swallowing half a cud.

"Looky, you ol' hoss-thief," he sputtered. "I wouldn't swap that bow for a carload of bull calves!"

"Didn't figure on swappin' that calf," Doc murmured. "Got a watch chain.

Mighty purty, even if it ain't real gold. But I figure to an ol' ninny like you who don't know the real thing when he sees it, that won't make no difference."

MacLoyd squirmed and didn't look Doc in the eyes. Doc dropped the chain on the desk, crossed over to the fiddle and got the new bow. In his fingers it sure felt mighty pretty.

Of course, the sheriff realized that Doc had the bow coming for the part he'd played in exposing Manzel's fake scheme, but on the other hand—

Before MacLoyd could make up his mind whether or not to let Doc get away with this deal, Doc walked out of the office, swinging the bow. MacLoyd glared at the watch chain and began to cuss.

For a moment Doc stopped just outside the door and listened happily. Then, with an eager light in his eyes, he headed down the street toward home and his beloved red-gold fiddle.