



*Hankering after Sheriff MacLoyd's
mule, the tradin'
hombre's just as stubborn
as the critter!*

Matilda pointed her
bony finger and
told MacLoyd to get

Doc Swap's CONVALESCENCE

By BEN FRANK

ORDINARILY, old Doc Swap was as even-tempered as anyone in and around the little cowtown of Dry Bluffs. But on this day, when he read the telegram which Dooley Dobson, the depot agent, handed him, his round, whiskery face turned from pink to an angry red. Likely if Doc could have reached the valuable antique brass fire tongs by the native rock fireplace, he would have flung them through a window, he was that putout.

"Tarnation an' ding-dum!" he roared.

Dooley Dobson took one look at the old swapper's flaming blue eyes and fled

from the neat white cottage.

Doc re-read the telegram and began to cuss. It said:

RECEIVED THE SHERIFF'S WIRE ABOUT YOUR ACCIDENT. THE WAY YOU RANT AROUND, AM NOT SURPRISED YOU ARE SERIOUSLY INJURED. HAVE WIRED OLD FRIEND IN JUNCTION TO COME TAKE CARE OF YOU. SHE USED TO BE A NURSE. NONE BETTER. SHOULD ARRIVE ON TEN O'CLOCK TRAIN. URSULA.

Ursula was Doc's sister. She lived in Philadelphia and had more money than she knew what to do with. Her telegrams were

always upsetting, but this one topped them all.

In the first place, Doc hadn't been seriously injured when he'd stumbled over a loose board in the walk in front of Cy Pulley's barber shop. He'd merely sprained an ankle. In the second place, he didn't want any women, even the world's best nurse, taking care of him.

The third time he read the telegram, he realized that Sheriff MacLoyd was responsible for informing Ursula of his mishap, and Doc's cussing grew in savagery as it turned on his old rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart—swapping and fiddle playing.

"Dad-blasted, lop-eared ole star-toter!" he roared. "Had no business wirin'—"

The old Seth Thomas on the fireplace mantel began to strike ten, cutting Doc short and reminding him that the nurse was due to arrive any minute.

He shifted his weight on the cot which had been set up for him in the front room, and bellowed. "Pee-wee, come here, yuh ole buzzard! Hurry 'fore it's too late!"

PEE-WEE MILLER, a runty oldster who had spent most of his sixty years cooking for ranches and railroad gangs when he wasn't arguing about who won the Civil War, came bow-legging it into the room, wiping his gnarled hands on a none-to-clean apron. Pee-wee was Doc's self-appointed nurse and housekeeper.

"What's the matter?" Pee-wee asked anxiously, his voice somewhat muffled by a huge cud of eating tobacco and a long cigar. "Ankle hurtin' yuh again, Doc?"

Doc handed the telegram to the runty cook.

"Ankle hurtin' don't amount to shucks compared to this!"

On reading the telegram, Pee-wee swallowed half his cud, while his eyes popped and his skinny face turned pale.

"Good gravy!" he exploded. "A woman nurse!"

"Ain't but one thing to do," Doc wheezed. "Yuh rush down to the depot an' head her off. Tell her I got smallpox!"

The front door opened, and a tall, thin-faced man with bean-pole arms and bony legs stepped into the room. He was Sheriff MacLoyd of Bluff County, and he was trying to hide his concern for Doc behind a stony expression. Not for the world would he let anyone, especially Doc, know that it grieved him to see his old enemy in a hundred swaps laid up.

"So yuh're still layin' around, yuh lazy ole goat," he said scornfully.

Seeing the sheriff, Doc felt his anger mount. For forty years, he and MacLoyd had been apparent enemies, each trying to best the other in a swap.

Doc shook a fat finger at the sheriff.

"Yuh buttin'-in ole hoss-thief!" he roared. "Wirin' my sister I'm injured serious. Makin' her send a—"

When Doc got about so riled, he never could talk straight. Now his voice choked off, so he handed the telegram to MacLoyd.

Lips moving at each word, the sheriff read it. Unloading a sizzling stream of tobacco juice into the fireplace, he began to grin as he realized that for the first time in many years, he'd really put Doc behind the eight ball, even if he hadn't intended to when he'd wired Ursula. He had wired her simply because at the time, he'd thought Doc pretty badly hurt. But now—a woman nurse for old Doc Swap!

"Why," he purred, "that's mighty nice of Ursula."

Doc opened his mouth to let fly some choice cusswords, but suddenly he remembered something. MacLoyd owned a lanky mule which he had recently acquired in a trade.

Now, Doc had no use for a mule. In

fact, he considered mules and lead dimes as belonging to the same category. But anything MacLoyd owned, Doc was sure to want—and try to get by hook or crook in a swap.

Thinking of the mule, Doc quickly downed his anger and fitted an innocent smile to his bearded face.

“It was right thoughtful of yuh to wire Ursula,” he said.

Doc’s sudden change of pace was a danger signal not to be ignored. Deep suspicion came into the sheriff’s pale eyes.

“I’m glad yuh appreciate it,” he said warily.

“Been thinkin’ some about yore mule,” Doc went on blandly. “I don’t hanker to own a mule, but I might take it off your hands. Got antique brass fire tongs I might swap.”

MacLoyd knew that the antique piece of brass was well worth the price of the mule, but his suspicion made him cautious.

“Ain’t got no need for fire tongs,” he muttered. “Besides, that mule is a mighty fine animal.”

“Phooey!” Doc snorted. “A mule’s a mule.”

“This’n’s a exception,” MacLoyd cut in. “Mebbe if yuh was to throw in some boot, say yore ole fiddle—”

Doc was mighty touchy about his beloved red-gold fiddle, and the suggestion that he throw it in to boot was nothing more or less than a direct insult. His face began to turn red again. He forgot about his ankle and moved his leg. A pain shot through him, adding fuel to his rising anger.

“Why, yuh beaked-nose old ninny!” he sputtered. “By now yuh oughta have sense enough to know yuh can’t never get my fiddle in a swap! Dad-blast’t, I’ll trade yuh outa that mule for a little of nothin’ ‘fore yuh know it. An’ no boot!”

“Them is big words,” MacLoyd sneered. “Especially comin’ from a hombre who is flat on his back an’ can’t go to Sugar Valley on a swappin’ spree.”

Sugar Valley!

DOC felt a tinge of helplessness. Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were swappers. Swapping sharpened Doc’s mind, helped him solve problems such as getting the best of the sheriff in a trade. But now he was flat on his back, confined to his cottage. Without going on a swapping spree, he reckoned he didn’t have a chance to get the mule.

Cussing into his ragged whiskers, he stared through a front window. He saw a stranger on a dun horse, riding along the one street. The man packed a gun low and wore a black hat pulled over his eyes. Doc didn’t give him a second thought.

Suddenly he lifted himself up on one elbow, wincing slightly at the pain in his ankle, and pointed a pudgy finger at MacLoyd.

“Who says I can’t go on a swappin’ spree?” He turned on Pee-wee Miller. “Go hitch my bay team to my covered wagon. Fix me a bed in it.”

“Now, Doc!” Pee-wee protested.

“Yuh heard me, yuh ole buzzard!” Doc thundered. “I’ll show this star-totin’ coyote. I’ll have that mule before the end of the week, or my name ain’t—”

“What’s going on in here?” a calm but firm voice asked.

The three old-timers turned wide eyes on the doorway.

Arms folded, a woman in white stood glaring at them. She stood a good six feet tall in her flat-heeled shoes, and her broad shoulders bulged with muscle. Her steely eyes whipped about the room and filled with disapproval at everything she saw, including Pee-wee Miller and Sheriff MacLoyd.

“Gents,” she said coldly. “I am Matilda Armstrong, a nurse, and have been called here by my dear friend, Miss Ursula. From now on, I’m in charge of the patient—and he’s not moving from that bed until he’s well!”

She pointed a big finger at MacLoyd. “I don’t aim to have no-body like you annoying my patient. Get!”

His bony face slack, the sheriff took one look at the pointing finger and leaped through the doorway.

Matilda turned on Pee-wee, eyeing his cigar with distaste.

“Who’re you?” she asked harshly.

Pee-wee swallowed the rest of his cud, almost lost his cigar, and did lose his voice. As he-fumbled for a fresh chew, Doc came to the rescue.

“He’s Pee-wee Miller,” he murmured. “He’s takin’ good care of me. Since I’ve got him, I don’t need you, so goodby an’—”

Matilda Armstrong ignored this completely.

“Three things I can’t stomach,” she said. “One, gun shootin’. Two, dogs. Three, cigar smoke. It makes me deathly sick. Mr. Miller, there’s the door!”

Loyalty to Doc make Pee-wee hesitate. Seeing this, Matilda stepped to the fireplace and picked up the brass tongs. That did it. Pee-wee dropped his ratty plug of tobacco and dived for the door. The last Doc saw of him, he was still running.

The nurse returned the tongs to the hearth.

“Now,” she said, “you’ll get the kind of care a brother of Miss Ursula deserves. First, I’ll give you a bath.”

Doc felt himself grow weak with horror. This, he knew, was something he’d never live down, having a woman nurse give him a bath. Why, he’d never be able to look anyone in the face again. He closed his eyes and began to gasp for breath.

“Too weak to take a bath,” he whispered frantically. “Reckon yuh’ll have to wait till I’m stronger.”

Matilda took one look at his bloodless face and decided to let the bathing go until a later time. Sure that Doc was comfortable, she retired to the kitchen to look things over.

Recovering from his shock, Doc propped himself up and stared through the window. A ramshackle spring wagon caught his attention. As it drew closer, he saw Ike Johnson and his wife, Millie, nesters from Sugar Valley, sitting on the spring seat. Ike stopped his team in front of the white cottage, and both he and Millie climbed to the ground and headed toward the house. .

Doc settled back on the cot. When Millie knocked timidly, Doc invited his visitors in.

“Heard about yuh bein’ laid up,” Ike said.

“Anything we can do, Doc?” Millie asked kindly.

Doc shook his head, his eyes fastening on the brass fire tongs. In spite of their value—he’d swapped a right good cow for them—they were a much .too dangerous weapon to have about the house along with Matilda.

“See yuh got some chickens an’ eggs in yore wagon,” Doc murmured. “Mebbe I could swap them brass tongs for—”

A SOUND from the kitchen door stopped him. Matilda, her bulging arms folded, stood glaring into the room.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” she said to Ike. “He’s mighty sick and don’t know what he’s saying.”

With that, she turned and went back into the kitchen.

Ike and Millie eyed Doc worriedly.

“I reckon he’s had a set-back,” Millie whispered.

"Doc," Ike said, "I wouldn't want to take them valuable tongs. I'll just give yuh a couple chickens an'—"

Doc was a swapper, not a receiver of charity.

"Ain't out of my head," he declared. "Don't want no gifts. I want to swap them tongs."

"Take it easy, Doc/, Ike said soothingly. He stooped over suddenly and picked up the ratty plug which Pee-wee had dropped. "Tell yuh what, I'll swap yuh two fries an' two dozen eggs for this."

Doc blinked in surprise. It occurred to him that Ike was making this offer simply because he believed that Doc was a very sick man, but before Doc could get hold of his voice, Ike had dropped the plug into a pocket and was heading toward his springwagon. Doc lay back on his pillow, closed his eyes and attempted to look really sick just to see what would happen.

"Ike," Millie called softly, "make it three chickens an' three dozen eggs. We don't want to cheat poor ole Doc."

Doc said nothing, but the wheels in his head were spinning. Swapping always sharpened his mind.

A few minutes later, Ike and Millie went on their way. Doc reckoned it wouldn't be long until the natives of Bluff County would hear that he, Doc Swap, had had a relapse and was about to cash in his chips.

It wasn't long after this when Doc saw Mule Turner and his wife, Ida, drive up in their rattly wagon which was loaded with ear com. He guessed that the Johnsons had met the Turners on the road and told them how sick he was.

The Turners came in on tip-toes. Doc smiled at them bravely, and murmured "Just the folks I want to do some swappin' with."

The Turners exchanged worried glances. Doc really looked and sounded

bad. Nurse Armstrong came to the door and shook her head solemnly.

"Now, Doc," Mule said, pulling at one big ear, "don't talk. Just rest."

"I'll swap yuh my bay team for five bushels of corn," Doc said weakly, "an' throw the harness in to boot."

"Out of his head," the nurse whispered.

"No such thing," Doc said. "I want to swap!"

"Swappin's his life blood," Ida said pityingly. "Make some kind of a dicker with him, Mule."

"Couldn't take advantage of Doc when he's off his beat," Mule muttered. Then to Doc, "I'll swap yuh five bushels of corn for—for a half-dozen eggs."

Doc shook his head feebly. "Would have to have boot."

"Got a scoop I'll throw in to boot," Mule offered.

"It's a deal," Doc mumbled. "Just pile the corn in the front yard an' leave the scoop leanin' against the house."

After Mule and Ida had gone, Doc blinked happily at the ceiling. His swapping business was well under way, and he had no doubt that other nesters would soon arrive to pay him what they considered a last visit and to make one more swap to keep him happy until the end. But two things had him worried. One, how to skin MacLloyd out of the mule. Second, how to get rid of Matilda Armstrong before she got around to giving him a bath. Thinking of this latter possibility, he shuddered.

A slight noise made Doc lift his head. Pee-wee Miller stood in the doorway, his eyes whipping about for signs of danger.

"Come on in," Doc whispered. "The nurse's in the kitchen."

Pee-wee eased into the room, leaving the screen door propped open for an emergency exit.

“Doc,” he whispered, “they’s a rumor goin’ around that yuh’ve had a relapse an’ are nearin’ the Pearly Gates.”

“Pee-wee,” Doc returned softly, “there’s only one thing that can save me: That is gettin’ rid of Matilda Armstrong. Peewee, put yore head down an lis’en to me.”

PEE-WEE complied, and Doc gave him some careful instructions. Just as he finished, Matilda stepped into the room. This time, Pee-wee didn’t wait for her to pick up the fire tongs.

“One thing that makes me sick,” Matilda growled, “is cigar smoke. If that little runt comes here again with that cigar, I’m goin’ to make a patient out of him!”

She returned to the kitchen, and Doc kept a weather eye out the window. Soon he saw that Pee-wee had followed orders. Coming toward the cottage were Wes Shotwell, the blacksmith, Jeff Webber, the storekeeper, Goop Gibson, proprietor of the Palace Saloon and Cy Pulley, the barber. Each man was puffing on a long, black stogy. Remembering that Matilda couldn’t stand cigar smoke, Doc smiled in anticipation.

The men filed quietly into the room, took chairs and began to flood the air with smoke. In less than thirty seconds, Matilda’s florid face appeared in the doorway. She took one sniff of the foggy air, and her face turned a sickish green.

“Got to have my friends in to see me,” Doc said innocently. “ ‘Course they smoke cigars, but I reckon yuh’ll just have to ignore the smell.”

Matilda got a grip on herself. Also, on the brass tongs.

Doc took one look at his friends’ faces and knew that defeat was at hand.

“Scat!” Matilda said with a flourish of the tongs.

The cigar smokers stampeded. The

door proved to be a bottle-neck, but the men managed to get through it without breaking any bones.

“And,” Matilda bellowed after them, “don’t come back!”

She put down the fire tongs, folded her muscled arms and eyed Doc squarely.

“Mister,” she said firmly, “as long as Miss Ursula wants me to take care of you, I’ll do it! Nothing can drive me away. And now, if you feel equal to it, I’ll clean you up. May even shave off them whiskers an’ make you look a little human.”

Shave off his ragged white whiskers? That was almost worse than having the woman give him a bath. Doc sank back on his pillow, his face pale.

“My, my,” the nurse said. “That nasty cigar smoke’s making you sick, too. Well, I’ll fix that.”

She opened all windows, gathered up a spare bedsheet and fanned the smoke out of the room. She left the windows wide.

After she’d gone back into the kitchen to finish clearing up the mess Pee-wee Miller had left, Doc lay staring hopelessly through the window. Again he saw the stranger with the black hat and the low-hung gun ride by on the dun horse, but Doc was too worried about his own plight to think about the stranger. He also saw a gang of Box-O cowhands ride into town, but at the time that meant nothing to him.

It was not until Rip Riley, foreman of the Box-O, dropped into pay what he thought was his last visit to the old swapper that Doc had an inspiration.

“Rip,” he said, “before I pass on to the Happy Huntin’ Ground, there’s just one thing I want to hear. An’ that’s a lot of shootin’. Shootin’ is music to my ears. Bring yore boys in here an’ have ‘em empty their guns through the windows.”

“Doc yuh’re shore enough outa yore head,” Rip muttered.

“I know it,” Doc agreed, “but yuh

can't deny a dyin' man his last request, even if he is loco."

"I reckon that's right," Rip nodded. "As soon as I can round up the boys an' sober 'em up a mite, I'll bring 'em."

Rip hobbled out on his high-heeled boots, and Doc smiled happily. Maybe Matilda could rout a few cigar smokers, but the Box-O boys were critters of a different stripe.

The Box-O foreman had just ridden away toward the Palace Saloon where the rannies were spending their money, when old Dad Blamit came driving up in his go-cart behind an old swayback horse. Dad Blamit lived in the valley not far from Sugar Creek and raised vegetables. His cart was well loaded with watermelons and cabbages.

White beard waving, the old gardener sidled quietly into the room. "I'll be dad-blamed if I ever thought yuh'd pass on to yore reward before me," he said sadly.

"Allus liked ripe watermelon in my un-sick days," Doc murmured. "I'd like one now before the end comes."

"Got a nice'n I'll give yuh," Dad Blamit offered.

Doc shook his head. "Never was no hand to take things unless I could swap for 'em. Trade yuh my house for a small melon."

DAD BLAMIT blinked in shocked surprise. Doc was a heap worse then he'd thought.

At that moment, Matilda poked her head into the room. "He don't know what he's saying," she whispered hoarsely.

A great wave of sympathy for the sick shook Dad Blamit. "Doc," he insisted, "I want to give yuh a melon."

"Trading seems to be his life blood," the nurse said.

Dad Blamit's bleary eyes lit on a cigar stub which the nurse had overlooked. He

smiled suddenly.

"Doc," he said, "I'll swap yuh two melons an' throw in a head of cabbage to boot for that cigar butt in the ash tray there."

"It's a deal," Doc managed to say.

After the old gardener had gone, Doc said to Matilda, "Nurse, slice me a hunk of that biggest melon."

"A man's who's able to eat watermelon," she said sternly, "is able to have a bath and a shave."

Quickly Doc sank back on his pillow with feigned exhaustion. Matilda sure had him buffaloed. He wished the Box-O boys would hurry up with their shooting, for he certainly hankered to sink his teeth in some red melon meat. And get rid of Matilda to boot.

After his nurse had returned to the kitchen to prepare dinner, Doc sat up cautiously. His ankle, he noted, didn't pain much now when he moved it. Another day, and he'd be back on his feet likely.

He fumbled in a pocket for his jackknife. He was all set to crawl on his hands and knees to the far corner of the room where Dad Blamit had left the two melons when he caught a glimpse of Sheriff MacLoyd coming toward the cottage. Hastily Doc returned the knife to his pocket and got back in bed. He reckoned now was a good time to try his new swapping strategy on his old rival.

The bony sheriff made sure that Doc was alone before he set his number twelve boots inside the door. As he approached the cot, he pretended to care not at all that Doc was ill. But he'd heard rumors that Doc was about ready to cash in his chips and he couldn't hide the worry that crept into his pale eyes. Doc didn't miss any of this.

"Yuh're lookin' better, I'm sorry to say," MacLoyd observed.

"I don't believe it," Doc murmured

weakly.

“Shucks,” MacLoyd went on cheerfully, “yuh’ll be up an’ around in a day or two.”

But there was no conviction in his voice, and Doc decided now was the time to strike while the iron was hot.

“Sheriff,” he said faintly, “I’ve been thinkin’ about yore mule. Reckon I just got to make one more swap with yuh before—”

“So you’re back!” Matilda Armstrong said from the kitchen doorway.

MacLoyd’s homely face lost color, and he got set to run.

Seeing the swap getting away, Doc said, “Now, Matilda, the sheriff’s just payin’ me a friendly call.”

“Hush!” Matilda said, and Doc hushed.

Matilda pointed an angry finger at the sheriff.

“Scat!” she thundered.

MacLoyd scatted.

Cussing to himself, Doc sank wearily back on the pillow and closed his eyes. He sure enough had to get rid of Matilda if he ever expected to swap MacLoyd out of that mule.

A trickle of sweat ran down one cheek. He was behind the eight ball, and he knew it. He wanted a hunk of watermelon. He wanted to get up and hobble about the room. And he wanted the sheriff’s mule. But the moment he showed strength enough to accomplish any of these things, Matilda was certain to give him a bath and a shave.

A shuffling of boots made him open his eyes.

GUNS in hand, the Box-O boys were filing into the room. There were seven of them, not counting Rip Riley. Doc grinned and nodded his head. The boys grinned back at him sadly and took places at the windows and the front door.

At a signal from Rip, they cut loose with their artillery.

The blasts fairly shook the cottage off its foundation. A piercing scream came from the kitchen, followed by the clatter of pans hitting the board floor.

“That does it,” Doc thought happily.

But Matilda was made of sterner stuff than he suspected. A heavy iron skillet in one hand, a rolling pin in the other, she leaped into the room. She knew how to use both weapons, but the Box-O boys were tough, well liquored and having the time of their lives. They dodged the blows and kept on shooting.

Matilda suddenly changed her tactics. She discarded her weapons, rolled big fingers into a rock-hard fist and clipped Rip Riley neatly on the chin. Rip went down, out cold.

A wild gleam in her eyes, Matilda scooped up Rip’s fallen six-gun. She squeezed trigger, and one of the boys lost his sombrero. Right then and there, the fun ended for the Box-O rannies. They dived through windows and door and lit on their feet, running. As for Rip, he lay on the floor, blissfully unaware of defeat. Matilda picked him up as if he were a sack of old rags, tossed him through the doorway and threw his six-gun after him.

Looking highly pleased, Matilda dusted off her hands and turned her attention to Doc. Satisfied that he was still alive after all this excitement, she went back into the kitchen to finish dinner.

Doc sat up and wiped the clammy sweat off his bald head. He cast one hungry glance at his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he’d swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered this deal one of the highlights of his career—and thought some of clamping it over his head and slipping away from the house. But he reckoned that Matilda would catch up with him, and then, sure enough, he’d be

doomed for a shave and a bath. Sadly, he lay back on the white sheets and cursed softly.

A few minutes later, Matilda came bustling in with a tray of steamy, appetizing food. For a moment, Doc forgot he was a sick man rapping at Saint Peter's Pearly Gates. He sat up quickly and reached for a knife and fork. He reckoned he had a hollow place inside him the size of a molasses barrel.

He forked a huge hunk of roast beef to his mouth and began to chew with deep pleasure. Then he happened to glance up at Matilda's big blocky face. What he saw turned the food to ashes in his mouth.

Matilda stood beside him with her big arms folded. A pleased smile pulled at her grim mouth, and there was an unmistakable gleam in her steely eyes.

"I see you're feeling better," she said. "Where do you keep your razor?"

Doc choked on the beef and dropped limply back on the cot, doing his best to look the part of a man at death's door.

"Havin a relapse," he mumbled. "Feel dizzy. Food makes me sick. I hear music—harp music."

Matilda grabbed Doc's wrist to feel his pulse. His heart was beating like a triphammer, but not from illness. However, Matilda had no way of knowing that the rapid pulse under her strong fingers was due to Doc's sudden fear of a shave and a bath at her hands. She frowned worriedly.

"Just relax and take it easy," she said kindly.

She gathered up the tray and headed for the kitchen. Watching her, Doc sighed deeply. He couldn't remember the day when he'd been so downright hungry, but as long as she was his nurse, he reckoned he'd just have to starve. And then he heard the distant barking of a dog, and a new hope was born.

Sure that Matilda was out of sight, he lifted himself up and looked through the window. Just as he'd hoped, he saw Dog-ears Dover coming along the street, riding a flea-bitten burrow. Behind the burrow trailed a lone hound.

DOC slid from the cot and hobbled to the window. Dog-ears glanced up, Doc motioned frantically. Surprise showing on his seamy face, Dog-ears slid from the burrow and shuffled up to the front door of the cottage. By then Doc was back on the cot, acting as sick as he knew how. Looking unhappy, the man tiptoed into the room.

"Heard yo' was right sick," he said, "but didn't figure to find yo' lookin' so all tuckered out."

Doc glanced warily up at the man. Dog-ears Dover had moved into Sugar Valley from Missouri. He was an old bachelor who possessed twenty-two dogs and a desire to avoid work. At the moment, Doc saw, his bleary eyes were filled with unconcealed sympathy.

"What kin I do fo' yo' all?" Dog-ears asked sadly.

"Fore I pass on," Doc whispered feebly, "I want to see yore fine dogs again. Allus loved dogs. How soon can yuh go home an' bring back all of 'em so's I can hear 'em bark an' pat their heads?"

Dog-ears wiped a hairy hand across his blurring eyes. He, too, was a dog lover and understood exactly how Doc felt.

"Why," he choked, "if I hurry all get-out, I should oughta be back in two—three hours."

"Hurry," Doc gasped, "or it may be too late."

Dog-ears turned and ran for his burrow.

As for Doc, he felt mighty pleased with himself. Maybe his nurse could cope with cigar smokers and cowboys, but

twenty-two dogs would certainly give her a bad time. Especially the miscellaneous assortment which Dog-ears possessed.

The old swapper was all set to take a little snooze when the rattle of gunfire lifted him to a sitting position. As near as he could tell by the sounds, the shots came from the center of town.

He swore softly and settled back on his bed. If it hadn't been for the presence of Matilda Armstrong, he would have likely used a broom for a crutch and hobbled out into the street to where he could see things. But he wasn't running any chances with Matilda.

Just as he got comfortably settled again, a sound at the side window made him turn.

A stranger in a black hat stared at him. The same man who had ridden into Dry Bluffs on a dun horse.

Grinning crookedly, the man put one long leg over the window sill and followed it into the room. His left sleeve was blood soaked, and he held a long-barreled Colt in his right hand. His hard eyes whipped about the room.

"Not a bad place to hole up a day or so," he observed. "Especially since there's a nurse here to look after my arm and fix me up."

Matilda stepped into the room. She took one look at the man and his gun and paled slightly.

"Lady," the man hissed, "get busy on this arm!"

Matilda said nothing. She motioned toward a chair, and the man sat down. She produced a pair of scissors and snipped away the bloody sleeve, exposing a mean looking flesh wound.

"Blasted sheriff sure winged me," the man gritted.

Five minutes later, Matilda had the man's arm expertly bandaged. Feeling safe

with this gentle fingered woman and the sick fat man, the hombre holstered his gun.

"Now," he growled, "I'll have to tie yuh two up. Can't run no chances of yuh givin' away my hidin' place. Lady, tear one of them bedsheets into strips, an' don't be all day about it!"

A dangerous glint came into Matilda's steely eyes. She walked unhurriedly toward Doc's cot, going close to the fireplace. The scissors supped from her fingers and rattled on the hearth. She turned her back on the man as she stopped to pick up the scissors. When she straightened, she held not the scissors, but the brass fire tongs.

BEFORE the man knew what was going on, he didn't know anything, for she'd clipped him on the head with the brass tongs.

"While he's unconscious, I'll get the sheriff," she said.

Doc was doing some fast thinking.

"No hurry about that," he said weakly. "Just tie him up an' chuck him in the back bedroom. Time enough to go after the sheriff when I'm feelin' more like bein' left alone."

Deciding that perhaps she shouldn't get too far away from her patient after this latest excitement, Matilda found a length of clothesline rope and did a businesslike job of hog-tying the stranger. She then carried him into the bedroom.

When she came back into the front room, Doc lay with his eyes closed. Shaking her head, she went into the kitchen. A moment later, Doc heard the back door open and close. He slid from the cot and hobbled to where he could see the back yard. Matilda was hanging sheets on the clothesline. On his way back to the cot, he saw Sheriff MacLoyd and his deputy, Ham Brady, riding out of town.

Doc smiled to himself and let them ride on. As soon as they failed to pick up the stranger's trail, Doc reckoned they'd be back. He wasn't sure how things would work out, but he had a hunch that the captured hombre was an ace in the hole. And thinking of this and the swapping he'd done and remembering the well-cooked dinner, he felt a certain fondness for Matilda. If only she wasn't so set on giving him a bath and shaving off his whiskers. He sighed heavily.

Matilda was still hanging up clothes when Dog-ears Dover arrived with his array of dogs. The Missourian opened the door wide, and the animals crowded into the front room, barking joyfully at this unexpected privilege. Everything had become a bedlam of scurrying feet, upset chairs and excited yelps when Matilda rushed in.

She turned pale and clutched at her heart. Three lop-eared hounds spotted her and tails wagging lovingly, wet tongues reaching for her hands and face, they lunged.

Matilda let out a gurgling squawk. But she was far from whipped. She ran into the kitchen and returned with Doc's dinner still on the tray.

The dogs turned on her hopefully. She tossed them a piece of beef for bait. There followed a mad scramble; then twenty pairs of wistful eyes fixed on the tray in her strong hands. She walked out of the house, and the dogs tagged at her heels. She tossed the food into the street, and the dogs went after it. She came back into the now quiet house and closed all doors and windows.

Dog-ears Dover took one look at her stony face and decided he had business elsewhere, pronto. Doc took one look at her face and knew despair. It appeared certain that Matilda Armstrong could handle any situation that might arise.

Then glancing through the front window, he saw Pee-wee Miller sneaking up behind the lilac bush.

"Nurse." Doc said faintly, "I shore appreciate yuh gettin' rid of them dogs. While I rest, yuh go ahead with yore work."

Looking pleased, Matilda went back into the kitchen. A moment later, Doc heard the back door open and close again. Then he lifted his hand and gave an all-clear signal to Pee-wee.

The runty little cook hobbled into the room.

"Pee-wee," Doc said unhappily, "I figure there's just one thing holdin' up my recovery. An' that's this woman nurse."

"Fire her!" Pee-wee blurted.

Doc shook his head. "Ain't but one person who can do that, an' she won't. That's my sister in Philly. Can't smoke Matilda out. Can't scare her away with shootin'. Can't sic dogs on her. Just got to think of some way to—Pee-wee. I got it!"

Doc did some fast talking.

"Ain't likely to work," Pee-wee muttered. "Like General Grant used to say, 'Boys,' he says—"

"Dad-blast General Grant!" Doc roared. "Yuh get hold of ole Dooley Dobson at the depot an' get him in a argument about why General Lee surrendered. Get him so riled he won't know what's a-goin' on. It's got to work, Pee-wee, or I ain't likely to ever leave my bed."

Still shaking his head dubiously, Peewee departed.

THE nurse was still outside when Sheriff MacLoyd and Ham Brady rode up to Doc's cottage. After a moment's hesitation, the sheriff slid to the ground and bow-legged it up to the door. Seeing Doc was alone, he entered the room.

Immediately Doc put on his sick act.

"Yes, sir," he murmured, "I'm a-sinkin' fast, I reckon. Seems as how I ought to make one more swap 'fore the end."

MacLoyd's big Adam's apple bobbed, and he wiped a bony paw across his damp eyes. "Doc," he choked, "forget about passin' on, an' let's yuh an' me work us up a swap like ole times."

"Reckon there ain't time," Doc mumbled.

MacLoyd's face paled. Life sure wouldn't be the same around Dry Bluffs without old Doc Swap. Then he had a happy thought. Maybe if he could keep Doc's mind off dying—

"I still got that mule to swap off," he said hopefully.

Doc felt a tingle of excitement run through him. He reckoned he had MacLoyd where he wanted him now.

"Swap yuh a head of cabbage for that mule," he muttered. "'Course, I'd want some boot. Say yore watch. But I'll throw in a owlhooter for boot."

MacLoyd felt his heart sink. Doc sure enough was in a bad way. Completely out of his head, talking about owlhooters to boot. "It's a deal, Doc," MacLoyd said hoarsely. "Now yuh can rest easy."

With trembling hands, the sheriff untangled his watch from a vest pocket and laid it beside the old swapper.

Doc smiled inwardly. Once he got rid of Matilda, he'd really have the laugh on MacLoyd. Just let him make one crack about Doc's having a woman nurse, and Doc would tell the world how the sheriff had swapped a mule for a head of cabbage.

Matilda swung into the room. She took one look at MacLoyd and reached for the brass fire tongs.

MacLoyd headed for the door, but he didn't make it, for at that moment Pee-wee Miller barged into the room. They met

head-on and rolled across the floor. Pee-wee got to his feet first. He held a yellow telegram in his scrawny hand.

"For you, Miss Armstrong," he panted.

Matilda took the telegram, ripped it open and read it. Her mouth went slack, and the yellow paper fluttered to the floor. She shot a glance at the clock.

"I'm leavin'," she said flatly, "an' have got just ten minutes to catch the train."

She pounded into the kitchen to get her suitcase. In no time at all, she was hotfooting it toward the depot.

Grinning, Pee-wee picked up the telegram and gave it to Doc.

"It was easy to snitch some blank telegrams and envelopes after I got ole Dooley steamed up about General Lee," he said.

Doc read Pee-wee's fake telegram. It said:

DECIDED MY BROTHER IS NOT WORTH
LOOKING AFTER. GET OUT IMMEDIATELY
AND LET HIM LOOK AFTER HIMSELF.
URSULA.

Smiling happily, Doc slid from the cot and stood up. "Pee-wee," he said, "get busy an' fix me a batch of sourdough biscuits an' a pound of bacon."

MacLoyd let out an angry snort. "Why, yuh fat ole crook, you ain't sick!" he bleated. "If yuh think yuh can swap me a head of cabbage for—"

"Open the bedroom door, Pee-wee," Doc said happily.

Pee-wee obeyed, and MacLoyd found himself staring down at the hog-tied stranger.

"Hey," he gurgled, "that's the jasper who tried to rob the Palace Saloon!"

"Kinda thought yuh might want him for somethin'," Doc murmured. "That's why I throwed him in to boot in our swap, but since yuh want to back out—"

MacLoyd lifted his bony shoulders. "Who said anything about wantin' to back out," he blustered weakly. "Why, a swap's a swap, an' that's all there is to it!"

"Yuh can turn that mule loose in my pasture," Doc said blandly. "An' don't forget the cabbage. Ain't no question about two heads bein' better'n one."

FACE red, Sheriff MacLoyd picked up the head of cabbage and stamped

through the door.

"Ham," he bellowed to his deputy, "I just caught up with that robber!"

Grinning widely, Doc followed Pee-wee into the kitchen. He reckoned that he must write Ursula a letter, thanking her for sending the nurse. But first, he had to fill that hollow space inside his oversized middle. Besides sharpening his mind, swapping sure made a man hungry.