

Prudence by Name

SOME FOLKS wonder why I've stayed on here at Cubb's Crossing all these years, deputy sheriff at the start and still the same, just handling the fussy little cases and the office routine and tending the jail. Some seem to figure that if I'd pushed myself at the right times I might have been sheriff. I know myself better'n they do. I'm not big enough for that and I don't mean in size because I'm close to six foot in my socks and not too long ago could still hoist one end of a solid wagon without grunting extra much. I'm not complaining. I've been a fair average deputy and I've kept a nice jail on the little tax money squeezed out for that and I've found the job a good spot to get to know people and what goes on around town and in the country hereabouts. Some of the best friends I've had have served time in my jail. People are what count anywhere and you might not believe it but in this work you get to know a few worth knowing. Like Amos Birdsall and his wife Prue.

They came to the Crossing on a Monday. They could have got here on Sunday but Prue wouldn't travel on the Lord's day so they camped out along the trace a ways and waited for the day to pass. They came on in Monday morning, the whole family, Amos and Prue on the front seat of their wagon and the two kids riding on the lowered tail gate beside the crate of chickens and their skimpy belongings piled between with a tattered old canvas pulled over and lashed down.

Quite a few people were coming in those days, off and on over a stretch of months. A parcel of sections west of town had been opened to homesteading and the people were coming to stake claims. The land wasn't much, middling fair for cattle grazing but not for quar-

ter-section farming, but a promotion outfit had been sending out the usual fancy-talk fliers back through more settled areas and the people had been coming. Some stayed and stuck it and some didn't. My first bet was the Birdsalls wouldn't.

You could hardly blame me on that. They sure didn't show much when I first saw them. This was back in Sheriff Godbee's time and the two of us were sunning on the porch of the building where we had our office and my jail when the wagon came along and stopped smack in front of us. They were a queer pair sitting on the wagon seat, big rawboned knuckly Amos in faded old overalls and patched plaid flannel shirt and a straw hat pulled down over raggedy hair, and long thin wispy Prue, all stiffness and angles, in a bebuttoned back-east dress so long it came down and hid her feet and so high and tight up around her neck it made her chin jut out sharp and stern. She had that laced-in hardshell look a woman gets when she wears a whalebone or wire-rigged corset and she had a back-east hat on her head, round and lopsided with fake flowers and a birdwing sewed on it and two big hatpins stuck through it. I saw her and I saw the two kids peeking around the wagonload from the tail gate and I couldn't help wondering how a woman like that ever managed to have kids. She didn't see us, not so you'd notice. She sat there, prim and stiff, with her lips pulled in to a thin straight line and her eyes fixed straight ahead. It was Amos spoke to us, bobbing his head and grinning like he felt he had to be kind of apologetic and soothing or someone'd start snapping at him.

"The Birdsalls," he said. "That's us, whole kit and caboodle. Me here, called Amos, and my wife, Prudence by name, and a couple of sprouts, boy and girl." He pushed the straw hat back a bit and scratched through the raggedy hair around one ear. "This the sheriff's place, ain't it? Was thinking, I was, maybe you could tell me the way to the Jenkins claim. Bought it, we have, in hard cash and hopes." He pulled the hat down again, hard. "There's a claim locator back at the hotel, there is, but he wants ten dollars. I ain't got ten dollars." He shuffled some on the wagon seat and pushed the hat up again and leaned toward us. "You see, sheriff, we had some extra, cash I mean, and two days ago at evening camp and the dark coming down, it was, this gent rides along with those two guns showing on his hips and—"

Amos stopped talking. Prue had turned on the seat and was look-

ing at him. He shrank about two sizes in two seconds. He grinned again in that apologetic way. "Forget it, sheriff," he said. "I was just blowing. Fact is we didn't have much left and I lost that, I did, back at Twin Forks bucking a faro bank. Can't figure what went wrong, I can't. My system ought—"

He stopped again. His wife, Prudence by name, was clearing her throat with a little rasping sound. She looked at us on the porch and away. "It was my fault," she said. "I let him go into that town by himself. The children were tired and I couldn't leave them and everything was so dirty we had to have some soap. So he did it again."

She sat still on the wagon seat looking straight ahead and Amos sat beside her bobbing his head and grinning in that apologetic way and Sheriff Godbee uncrossed his lean old right leg from over his left leg and crossed them again in reverse order and looked at me. "Howie," he said, "your jail's empty. Your desk's clear. Your middle's plumping. Saddle a horse and show these folks the way."

So there I was ambling along in the saddle beside the wagon and there Prue was jolting silent on the seat and there Amos was holding the reins in his big knucky hands and squinting sideways at me and asking questions about the territory and telling me something about the two of them. They'd had several places, back in Iowa the last one and a mortgage on it and they kept missing payments, maybe bad luck, as he said flipping a quick glance at Prue, maybe faro as he didn't say, and they'd had to sell out and take whatever was left over and start again. They were heading west out our way when they met Jenkins heading east and they liked the notion of a claim with some buildings on it already and pulled him down on his price and paid him. "Too bad, it was," Amos said. "Him in poor health like that and having to leave. Good luck too. For us, that is."

"Poor health?" I said. "Jenkins? The only poor health he ever had came out of a bottle."

Prue turned on the seat and they both looked at me and the wagon jolted along and they both stared at me. "Buildings," Amos said. "There's buildings on it, there is. There's got to be."

I couldn't look at them. I watched the road ruts sliding past under the wheels. "Well, yes," I said. "Yes, there's buildings." I nudged my horse ahead and led the way off to the right down the wagon

trace along the section lines and across the creek branch and up over the first rise beyond. I stopped and Amos brought the wagon along beside me and they could see the buildings, all the ramshackle three or really two and a half of them, the single-room tarpapered and slab-roofed shack and the split-log pole-and-sod-roofed shed with the open lean-to spreading out from one side.

They sat still and stared at the buildings. The two kids climbed down off the tail gate and stared too. "Anyway," I said, "there's a well. A good one."

Prue turned on the seat and looked at me and then at Amos. "Men," she said. "Why did God have to make men." She climbed down over the wheel on her side and marched straight to that ugly rough shack and through the door hanging on one hinge and the two kids looked accusing at me and Amos just as she had and followed her.

Amos bobbed his head at me but he didn't grin. "Edgy, she is," he said. "Been angry, she has, ever since out of blankets this morning and all because I wouldn't put on my Sunday clothes, I wouldn't, for coming into town. Knew I'd be unloading, I did, and starting work right away. Wasn't going to be changing back and forth." He pushed the straw hat back on his head and looked around. "Ain't much. Ain't much at all." He climbed down his side of the wagon and started toward the shack and Prue was in the doorway and her voice was high and shrill. "There's no floor," she said. Her legs seemed to crumple under her and she sat down on the big stone that was the doorstep and bent her head and put her face in her hands.

Amos stopped still, rocking on his big clumsy feet. "That man lied to me," he said. He raised one big knucky hand and clenched it into a fist and smacked it into the palm of the other hand. "There ain't no floor," he said. "All right, there ain't. But there's a roof, there is. We can rig a partition in that house. That shed'll make a fine chickencoop, it will. That lean-to'll take care of the team. We've got food in the wagon. Got our health too. We'll make out, we will, till I get a crop in and some more building done."

For a moment he seemed big and almost impressive standing there and then Prue raised her head and looked at him. "You promised me a board floor," she said. "It isn't decent without a board floor. Only the good Lord knows what it is to have to live with a man who doesn't even care if things are decent." And the little girl in the

doorway behind her spoke up, with the boy trying to shush her, and her voice was an exact copy of her mother's. "He doesn't care. He just doesn't care." And Prue stood up, all stiff and angles, and marched past Amos standing there and past me still sitting quiet on the horse, and pulled a broom out of the wagon and marched back and into that house.

Amos sighed and came over by the wagon and began to unlash the load. I slipped down and helped. Together we hoisted everything out and piled it on the ground. The kids came running and scurried like packrats carrying small stuff and I helped Amos carry the heavy things into the house where Prue was bustling and raising dust. That was easy for her to do because the top layer of the packed dirt that was the floor was dry and crumbly. She didn't say another word but it wasn't long before I had the feeling too I ought to step careful and watch how I behaved or someone'd start snapping at me. I was glad when there wasn't much else I could do to help and I could head home to town and my jail.

That was late spring. By early summer the talk drifting around was that the Birdsalls were queer folk, unfriendly and plain peculiar. After a while I began to notice that when people talked like that they were really talking about Prue. Amos was just there, a hard worker when he worked, which was irregular, and a talker when anyone would listen, but just a man roundabout bobbing his head and being apologetic when people were near. Prue was the dominant one. She made the sharp impression. She made one plenty sharp on Sheriff Godbee's wife Martha.

It took a lot to rile Martha Godbee. She was just as broad and ample in spirit as she was in body, which was more'n enough for any one person, but she was riled when she drove back to town in the old buggy that day. The sheriff and I, up on the porch, saw her coming along the road at quite a clip. She pulled in close and climbed out before I could jump down to help her and she heaved up the two steps and pushed herself into the extra-wide chair we kept there for her. "That woman," she said and blew out her cheeks with a puffing noise.

We didn't say a thing. We knew we'd get it all and in a rush. "That Prudence Birdsall woman," she said. "And I was only trying to be neighborly. Things being said around town and by women I

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respect and I wondered were they true and went out to see and get acquainted, and they are. She can't even say hello like ordinary folks. Puts her nose up and says how do you do in that silly voice supposed to be refined and it's a pleasure meeting a person and she stands smack in the doorway blocking it and won't ask a person in. Oh she would she says but it wouldn't be decent not having a board floor but just plain dirt and she'd like a person to know she wasn't raised to walk around indoors on dirt and she wouldn't have to if she didn't have a man doesn't care one way or another about things being decent and is so shiftless and plain no-account he can't even put boards under the feet of his wife and children."

Martha Godbee puffed out her cheeks again and took in a big breath and started again. "Her talking like that and him standing right there and hearing it and the whole place looking so much better with the work he's done on it and him standing there trying to look friendly and like she's really only joking and her going on and on with more of the same talk in that silly voice that's not joking at all and sneaking looks at him to see him wince. And what she's doing to those children is a crying shame, with her letting them stand around hearing her and making nasty remarks too and referring to their father like he was a thing and call him 'he' and 'him' like he didn't even have a name and her not slapping them even once for it. Who does she think she is running down her man like that and with people listening and her putting on airs out here where we're all just folks and proud to be and don't care what kind of floor a person's got long as she's really folks too."

Martha Godbee took in another breath and juttred her chin at the sheriff. "What kind of floor did we have when we first came out here? Speak up now, Fred, and tell Howie here. What kind was it?"

Sheriff Godbee looked at her with his old eyes bright. "Dirt," he said. He chuckled. "Whole damn house was dirt. Sod walls. Sod roof. Dripped water two days after a rain." He juttred his own chin a bit. "But why ain't you peeved at him too? If he was the man he ought to be he'd shut her off soon enough. He'd whale her backside the way I'd've yours had you gone around nagging and complaining."

"Humph," Martha Godbee said, making her extra-size chair squeak. "It wasn't worrying over any whaling you'd do kept me from complaining."

"Well, now, Martha," Sheriff Godbee said and his old voice was soft and gentle. "You tell me what it was kept you from it."

"Because I'm not the complaining kind," Martha Godbee said and then she pulled in her chin till it was about lost in the folds of her ample neck and her voice was soft and gentle too. "And because I knew soon as we had a little over from things we needed more, getting started, you'd get me a better house."

"Well now, Martha," Sheriff Godbee said again, "maybe that's just the difference. Maybe that Prudence woman doesn't know what you knew."

I expect that was it. Prue couldn't know whether Amos ever would get her a floor or any of the other things she nagged about because there wasn't much he'd ever done to show he was the getting kind. He had good intentions maybe but he couldn't seem to follow through on them. He'd start something and then he'd want to finish it the easy way. He worked hard, irregular as I said before but hard when he did, and he put in a crop and didn't run too big a bill at Rudy Ferebee's store for seed and for food when what they'd bought ran out. The season was good that year and he had a fair crop and he sold his stuff, mostly corn and other truck, through Rudy to the Army post back near Twin Forks and he paid off his bill and laid in supplies right careful according to Prue's list and he had thirty-three dollars left. Prue was there with him when he got the money and bought the supplies. She was with him when they loaded the supplies and drove around to Luke Wagaman's place, where Luke did blacksmithing and handled what building materials were freighted into town. Amos climbed down and went inside the shop to talk to Luke about boards and he didn't come back out, and after a stretch Prue climbed down and went in after him and he wasn't there.

So there was the Birdsall wagon stopped again by our office-and-jail porch, only Prue was alone on the seat this time looking mad and worried all at once and talking but not in any high-toned voice. So the sheriff and I climbed up on the seat with her and I took the reins and we went around to see Luke and found out what happened.

Lumber was high around here in those days. The nearest timber

and a sawmill were a long ways off and the railroad hadn't come through yet. Freight costs pushed prices up. Amos didn't want rough boards either, green and likely to warp. He wanted finished boards seasoned right. He went in the shop and got to figuring with Luke what he'd need for a floor and even though their house was small it tallied eighty-seven dollars. Amos took out his money and counted it over again and it still was only thirty-three of those dollars and then while Luke was scratching around in his head what kind of a deal he might fix to help these new Birdsall folks Amos lit out the back door. "Didn't say another word," Luke told us, looking up at us on the wagon seat. "Jammed the money in his pocket and scatted out the back way."

Sheriff Godbee reached and took the reins out of my hands. "The lop-eared jackass," he said and he smacked the team on their rumps with the rein ends. I had to grab Prue and hold her from jouncing off as we swung in a half-circle. "Have to ask your pardon, ma'am," Sheriff Godbee said, slapping steady at the team to keep them stepping fast. "But it's the truth. Any man thinks he's got a faro system is a lop-eared jackass."

We pulled to a quick stop in front of Clem Rickey's saloon. The sheriff and I piled down and hurried in and straight through to the back room and there he was, chewing on a big knuckle and slumped in a chair across the table from the dealer with the box. He saw us and he knew what was doing right away. He bobbed his head and grinned in that apologetic way. "Lost again, I have," he said. "And it ain't right. Should have run it up to more'n enough. Played my system, I did, but something went wrong and—" His voice died away. I expect we looked peeved. At least the dealer thought so because he put in fast with his own words. "It was straight play, sheriff. I don't run it crooked." And Sheriff Godbee fixed the dealer with a cold look. "Ain't arguing that," he said. "You wouldn't be in my district did I think different." He swung to Amos again and I thought he might let loose with some chilling comments but he just looked at Amos a moment and sighed. "Better go on out. Prue's waiting for you to take her home." And Amos pushed up and walked out front slow and heavy on his feet and climbed up on the wagon seat beside her and took the reins. She didn't look at him, not once after she saw him coming. She didn't even speak to him. She didn't need to.

She knew. She just sat silent, jolting as the wagon moved, and stared straight ahead and they went on along the road growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

That was a tough winter, snow often and staying and choking the roads. We were busy in town what with people sort of jammed together, not able to get out and around much. Sheriff Godbee had to spend a lot of time at Clem Rickey's helping Clem keep the boys behaving right and heading off fights when nerves were jumpy and since he couldn't always head them off my jail had boarders fairly frequent. I couldn't know much what went on at the Birdsalls' except that they were making out with Amos hustling to keep the house warm and Prue teaching the kids out of some schoolbooks she'd brought in her trunk. I expect no matter how big a fire Amos had inside the house it was still cold in there for him because people who happened by when the going was passable said he always seemed to be outside even in the coldest weather, pattering and wandering around all bundled in an old overcoat.

Then it was spring and everyone was buzzing busy while the good weather held and of a sudden Amos was standing in the office where I was helping the sheriff catch up on paperwork. He hadn't driven in. He'd hiked it. He had a bundle under one arm and he was about busting with his plans. "Going to get her that floor," he said. "Got my crop in. Boy and the team can do the cultivating, they can. Me now, I'm heading for the railroad camp. Forty and found, they're paying grading crews. Two months'll about make it. Appreciate it, I will, if one of you'll stop off at my place now and again and see everything's all right."

Two months he said. Two months, add a few days, it was and he was back. He came back the way he went, hooking a ride on a freight wagon, and hiked straight on home and drove into town again with his own wagon and to Luke Wagaman's and paid cash for good lumber and loaded it and stopped to push his head in our door and thank us and drove home. There was something wrong about the whole business and that wasn't just the fact Prue wasn't with him when he came in for the lumber. It was the fact he wasn't the least bit happy about what he was doing. He'd gone off tickled silly and proud he'd figured a way to get Prue her floor. He came back tight-

faced and quiet, hardly speaking to anyone, staring down at the ground in front of him when he walked along.

Maybe a week later, maybe longer but not much, I found Sheriff Godbee in his office chewing on a pencil and wanting to talk. "Howie," he said, "I never did like arithmetic and don't like the way things add up now. That Birdsall woman's invited Martha out to call tomorrow afternoon."

"Why not?" I said. "She's got her floor. But what's arithmetic got to do with that?"

"Not much," he said. "Not direct. But there's a couple other things. One's what Lewis told me when I was over at Twin Forks the other day. They had a little ruckus over there, a week, ten days ago. Man tried bucking a faro bank. Had a little luck and was winning. Began blowing what he'd do with it. Put a floor in his place, build it bigger, maybe ship in a piano. Luck turned and he lost, all he'd won and what he started with. Took it hard and had to be bounced into the road."

"I'll be damned," I said. "What's the other thing?"

"This in the mail today," he said, poking at a letter on his desk. "From Bowlus over at the junction on the freight route. Little trouble over there too. Figures about the day after the other. Somebody nipped a fistful of cash out of the drawer behind the bar in the saloon there. Probably did it while everybody was out watching a dogfight but wasn't noticed till a while later. Bowlus's been checking and can't find a trace. Now somebody's remembered seeing someone come out the door while the fight was on. Didn't know him but thinks he's seen him over this way sometime. Big man. Overalls and a straw hat."

"How much did he take?" I said.

Sheriff Godbee grunted. "What would you expect? They don't know exactly. Money hadn't been checked. But they figure it eighty-some dollars. I figure it eighty-seven."

I sat down in the other chair and stared at him and he stared back at me and after a while he sighed and pushed up. "Come on," he said. "Waiting never made any of these things any better. We'll go have a talk with Amos."

He wasn't in sight but Prue was when we stopped the buggy by the house. The door was open and she was standing in the doorway

with a broom in her hand and past her we could see the floor, good boards well fitted together, smooth and already almost shining like it had been swept and scrubbed half a dozen times a day. She didn't act at all the way she had that first time. She looked right at us and she almost smiled. "Oh, do come in," she said. "I can have coffee ready in a minute."

"No, thank you, ma'am," Sheriff Godbee said. "We haven't time. Just want to see Amos on a bit of business. Want to see him alone if you don't mind."

She was so still she seemed almost to have stopped breathing and her face began to change, getting pinched and tight again. "He's around somewhere," she said. "He was cleaning the chicken shed."

We started toward the shed and Amos came around the side of it and Sheriff Godbee took him by the arm and we went around the side together out of sight of the house and Prue in the doorway, and Sheriff Godbee started asking questions, making them more pointed as he got a little peeved, and Amos just looked at the ground. "I don't know what you're talking about," was all he would say and in a voice we could hardly hear. And sudden another voice, high-pitched and sharp, said the one word "Amos" and he jerked up straighter and Prue came around the corner of the shed. She must have been hiding there, listening to what went on.

"Amos Birdsall!" she said. "You can lie all you want to other people but you've never lied to me. Did you lose that money like all the rest?"

He tried to look at her and couldn't and stared down at his big knuckly hands. "Yes, Prue. I lost it, I did."

"And did you steal money from that saloon?"

"Yes, Prue. I took it, I did."

Prue turned to Sheriff Godbee. "All right," she said and her voice was harsh and bitter. "That's what you wanted to know."

"No," Sheriff Godbee said. "I knew. But that's what I wanted Amos to say."

There was a moment of quiet while we all were thinking our own thoughts and the two kids came running from somewhere calling out for their mother, and right away they sensed something was wrong and they ducked quick toward her and stood beside her, clutching at her skirt. The boy just scowled at Amos and scuffed the dirt but

the little girl began a sort of whimpering chant. "He's been bad again. I just know it. He's been bad again." And Prue shushed her by gathering her in closer with one arm and looked over her at Sheriff Godbee. "Well, anyway," she said, "you tell your wife to stay home now and walk around on her own floor. But there's one thing you'll have to let him do before you take him to jail."

Sheriff Godbee's old voice snapped. "Watch your words, woman. In front of these children."
"I will not," she said. "If their father's a thief, they might as well know it."

"All right," Sheriff Godbee said. "But there's thieving and there's thieving and stealing a man's self-respect is a damn bad thing too. Who but you's said anything about jail? It ain't our way to jail a man's got family responsibilities if that can be helped. What we've got to do now is figure a way for Amos to square this thing."

"I don't care what you do with him," Prue said. "But before you do whatever you do with him you'll have to let him get things out of the house for me. The children's cots and some blankets and the stove and all the food there is. I want them in this chicken shed."

"Chicken shed?" Sheriff Godbee said and that was one of the few times I ever saw him really surprised.

"That's where," Prue said. "You don't think I'm ever going to set foot on that floor again. Not on a floor that's not really mine and that's been paid for with thieving money. Not my children either."

Sheriff Godbee stared at her and started to speak and thought better of it. He turned to me and Amos. "A damn funny world," he said. "Maybe there's something to that woman after all. Come along. We'll tote those things out here and then see what can be done in town."

Plenty could. Plenty always could be done when Sheriff Godbee put his mind to it. He talked Luke Wagaman into handing back the eighty-seven dollars Amos had paid for the lumber. More than that, he talked Luke into letting Amos work out the price by helping at the blacksmith shop. That wasn't too big a favor Luke was doing because he had more work than he could handle fast as people wanted at the shop, and finding a helper could swing a hefty hammer like Amos during the busy summer season wasn't easy. In a way

Luke wasn't really handing back the money. He was just paying that much in advance for work Amos would do. Then Sheriff Godbee took the eighty-seven dollars and put them in an envelope with a letter to Bowlus at the junction, and just what he wrote in that letter I never knew but it stopped any further action in the case. So after I posted the letter and came back by our office-and-jail building and went in to have supper with the Godbees at their house next door I was thinking this Birdsall business was working out all right. Amos would get his meals at Luke Wagaman's and sleep in the shop till his stint was done and if Prue wanted to be stubborn and live in that chicken shed till her floor was really paid for that was her lookout. She was about as much to blame as Amos. It was her nagging drove him to do what he did.

That's the way I was thinking at the supper table, so I was somewhat surprised when there was a knock and Sheriff Godbee called a come-in and it was Amos pushed in through the front door. I wasn't so much surprised at seeing him as at what he said. "Mr. Godbee," he said. "Sheriff, I mean. I want you to lock me up in your jail, I do."

"Well now, Amos," Sheriff Godbee said and he didn't seem to be much surprised. "That's an interesting idea. Why?"

"Seems to me, it does," Amos said, "I ought to do some time for what I did. Can't do it while working, I can't. But nights and Sundays I can."

"Amos," Sheriff Godbee said and his voice was a little stern, "have you been out home and got that idea from Prue?"

"I have not," Amos said. "But it's thinking of her in that shed's helped me think of it for myself, it has."

"Howie," Sheriff Godbee said, "lock this man up. Tight. Let him out breakfast time weekday mornings and lock him up again smack after supper. Sundays you'll have to feed him like you do other boarders. Any time he doesn't show when he should, you go after him."

So there I had Amos in my jail, off and on, nights and Sundays, most of the summer. That's when I got to know him, not just the way you know somebody who happens to live in your district and calls you by name and passes the time of day with you, but the way you know a man who sleeps under the same roof for a while and sees

you close and gets to talking personal with you when a lantern's burning low. I'd come over after supper from the Godbees' and he'd be waiting on the porch and I'd take him in the building and lock him up, not in the waiting-for-trial quarters with bars all around but in the cooling-off quarters with the barred window and barred door and the old phonograph I had there to help boarders pass the hours. He'd stretch out on one of the bunks and like as not, evenings when he had no company, not even a drunk sobering up, I'd bring a chair and set it by the barred door and we'd talk till time for me to head for the cot I kept in my office. Talking with him like that got to seeming quite natural but I never did get used to him saying, as he did last thing at night, "Appreciate it, I do, you locking me up like this."

Not many nights and he was telling me a lot about himself and his early days. He'd been a farm boy in eastern Iowa and after his mother died and he was growing some size he skipped for a couple years and was a cowhand on a middling big ranch. Trailing with the older hands he had his first taste of faro. He had luck that first time and ran up a roll that went soon enough with the other hands' help but the memory of it stuck. Then his father died and since he was the only child the farm was his and he went back there and tried working it. Along about then he got married and began having bigger ideas and he slapped a mortgage on the farm to stock it with purebred cattle and then when payments were coming due he never seemed to have quite enough and he took to remembering his faro luck. I could fill in the rest easy.

It was while he was talking that way I asked the question that was bothering me. "Amos," I said, "back east where you were women aren't so scarce. How'd you ever hook on to one like Prue?" He didn't get mad at me. I expect he knew what I meant, at least how it looked to me. He scratched around in his raggedy hair and tried to answer me straight. "She's from New England, she is," he said like he was proud of that. "Had to earn her living so she came out to teach school. Had a hard time, she did, book-taught woman like that. Big boys wouldn't behave in school. Made fun of her and her ways. I whopped a few and she called to thank me, she did. Come summer we called on the preacher." Amos looked at me, a little red in the face and defiant. "She was pretty then, she was. Kind of soft and—and womanlike." He rolled over on the bunk and wouldn't

look at me any more and that was the only night he didn't thank me for locking him up.

A couple more weeks and I was beginning to nurse a worry. I was right fond of Amos by then and I could see this Birdsall business wasn't working out too well after all. There was Prue out in that chicken shed and there was Amos spending all his time working and being in jail and she hadn't come in once to see him. She knew what he was doing. Sheriff Godbee had been out special to tell her. But she'd been into town twice, driving their team, and got whatever she needed each time at Rudy Ferebee's store and gone right home again without stopping at the blacksmith shop and without even looking at my jail, when she went past on the road. And Amos was fretting about her. He wouldn't say anything more about her, but he was getting to look more like a big raggedy lonesome dog every day. I didn't know what to do about that but Sheriff Godbee did. He did it quick and direct and almost brutal the way he could be when he felt a need.

It was the next time Prue came to town, on a Saturday. She went to the store and would have gone on out of town again past our building but Sheriff Godbee stepped down into the road and grabbed the bridle of the near horse of the team and stopped the wagon. "Prue," he said, "you're a damn stupid woman. Why haven't you been in to see Amos?"

She reared up some on the seat. "Don't you dare talk to me like that!"

"I'll talk to you any way I've a mind to," he said. "You, a woman running out on her man a time like this."

"I'm not running out," she said. "I'm staying right there at that excuse of a home he's given me. Oh, I know what he's doing. He's trying to get back at me for nagging at him and now for living in that shed. Putting himself in jail. Working days and being locked up nights. Making himself look like—like a chain gang criminal."

"No," Sheriff Godbee said. "Like a man paying his debts. Working to pay for some boards for a silly woman. Serving time to pay the rest of us for breaking one of the rules of living we call laws." He let go the bridle and swung around and stomped up the steps and into his office.

Prue sat on the wagon seat staring after him. She saw me watching

and jerked herself straighter and clucked to the team. But the next day, Sunday, she was back, all decked in her eastern dress and hat, bringing a clean pair of overalls and a clean shirt and some biscuits and a jar of her jelly in a basket. She waited in my office and I went and got Amos and pushed him in where she was and had enough sense to close the door quick.

That's how things went along until close to harvest time, Amos working and being locked up and Prue coming every Sunday, always with something tasty in her basket. She was just as prim and sharp-faced as ever and Amos acted some Sundays when she left like she had worked him over mighty thorough with her tongue but at least she was coming to see him and he didn't have that lonesome-dog look any more. Then, one day, midweek, Amos came along from the shop just after noon and up on the porch where the sheriff and I were soaking sun. "Paid up, I am," he said. "Every last cent. Own that floor now. Every last board. Got a new deal with Luke, I have, starting next week. Two days' work a week for ready cash. Now I'm going home and move Prue back into the house and watch her walk around on those boards and feel good." He pushed his old straw hat up a bit and bobbed his head and grinned at us. "Ought to be some celebrating, there ought. Why'nt you two come along. Best friends we have around here, you are. Be the first visitors on Prue's floor."

Sheriff Godbee squinted at the sky, thinking his own thoughts. "Might be interesting," he said. "Howie, get the buggy out. Beats walking any day."

So there the three of us were bouncing along in the buggy following the road and then off to the right and down the wagon trace and across the creek branch and all the way Amos was talking and humming and bobbing his head in anticipation. Right then that floor and going home to tell Prue she could walk on it now was the biggest thing in the world to him.

The two kids saw us coming and ran out to see who it was and looked startled at his shouts and scurried back and around the house and when we swung in near the chicken shed there Prue was waiting and the two kids were behind her peering around at us. Amos jumped out and I started to follow and Sheriff Godbee stopped me. "No hurry," he said. "Maybe there's more to this thing."

There was. I don't know how he knew there would be but there

was. Amos hurried straight to Prue and she kind of backed away and didn't seem happy to see him coming. He was too full of his own feeling to notice and he grabbed her by the waist and picked her up and whirled her around and set her down and she stood quiet with a funny flat frightened look on her face. He still didn't notice. He took her by the arm and hustled her toward the house, talking steady how the floor was all paid for, every board, and how much better things were going to be all around, and she just stumbled along beside him with the two kids tagging and keeping her between them and Amos. He stopped by the doorstep and reached and pushed the door open and she pulled back away from him. "No," she said. "I can't. I just can't." The words faded away and the silence was a strange feeling all about with Amos caught in it and the two kids crouched by the house wall now afraid to move. Amos seemed to sag all over. "Why, Prue. I don't understand, I don't."

She just stood there, all stiffness and sharp angles, and she couldn't look in through the doorway and she couldn't look at him. "Prue," he said, his voice getting an edge. "What's wrong with you?" "I can't do it," she said. "All these weeks I've been out here knowing that floor was in there and how silly I've been. I can't go in there. It wouldn't ever seem right."

Amos looked in through the doorway at that floor that represented two months' railroad work and two more months' blacksmithing and a lot of nights and Sundays in jail to him. He stood straighter and he drew in a long breath that seemed to fill him out to full size. "Prue, girl," he said, "would you feel better if that floor just wasn't there?" She nodded, a bare little bobbing of her head, and he marched over by the chicken shed and took the rusty old ax leaning against it and marched back and in through the doorway and the whole house seemed to shake with the sounds of splintering wood. He came out and his arms were full of smashed pieces of those good boards. He threw them on the ground and with the ax he sliced shavings off one and huddled these in a little pile and put a match to them and when they were blazing he began to lay the pieces of board across the flames. And all the while Prue stood and watched him and the two kids crept close to her and held to her skirt and watched him too and she stood still and a flush of color climbed up her cheeks.

Amos rose tall from squatting by the fire and looked across it at her and the silence was a taut tight feeling there between them and it broke with the sound of the little girl's whimpering voice. "He's being bad again, bad again, bad—" And Prue's hands moved sudden and sure and she had the girl by the shoulders and shook her. "Don't you ever," she said, "ever once again let me hear you speak about your father like that." She looked back across the fire at Amos and her face was all twisted and crinkled from the effort not to cry. "Amos," she said. "My Amos." She came around the fire reaching out toward him and he put out a big arm around her shoulders. She raised her head toward him and for a moment there in the line of her throat arching upwards and her face open and eager to him you could see it. It was there and it was gone but it had been there. She was almost pretty and she was kind of soft and womanlike.

"There now, Prue," Amos said. "No more worrying now. Not ever again." He looked over her head at the two kids standing sort of lost and alone on the other side of the fire. He left Prue and went around and he scooped the little girl up in the crook of one big arm and held her high so her head topped his own and you could see this was something that hadn't happened to her for a long time and she was frightened at first and then kind of excited and pleased and he reached with his other arm and took the boy by the hand. "Sprouts," he said, "we have work to do, we have. Your mother doesn't want that particular floor in her house and she's right about it. Let's get busy. I'll do the chopping and you do the carrying."

Sheriff Godbee and I sat in the buggy and watched the four of them working together. The ax was thumping in the house and the kids were scurrying in and out with pieces of board and Prue was chucking these one by one on the fire. "You know what I'm going to do?" I said. "I'm going to kick in some myself and take up a collection in town. I'm going to get them another board floor."

"No need to do that," Sheriff Godbee said. "Prue's all right now. They're both all right. She's got something better'n a board floor."

She had. She had all right. Because sudden she remembered us and noticed us swinging the buggy quiet as possible to slip away and she came hurrying to stop us a moment. "Mr. Godbee," she said, "I want you to tell your wife to come call on me again soon as convenient for her." And Sheriff Godbee looked at Prue with his face seeming stern but his old eyes shining. "Prudence Birdsall, ma'am,"

he said. "I ain't so sure I ought to let my wife call on people that've only got a dirt floor for her to walk on." And Prue gave him look for look with her own eyes snapping and she snorted just the way Martha Godbee would. "Humph," she said. "A lot of difference your letting or not letting would make. It was me and not any dirt floor made her mad when she was here before. We'll be having a board floor again and it won't be because I nagged about it and maybe that'll be soon and maybe it won't because there are other things we need more but that won't have anything to do with her coming to call. She knows a floor isn't nearly as important as the people who walk around on it." And then Prue said what knocked all words out of Sheriff Godbee and made him fumble for his old bandanna to blow his nose. "Maybe she was born knowing that the way I wasn't," Prue said, "or maybe she's just lived so many years with you she couldn't help learning it."

We were mighty quiet, me and the sheriff, all the way back to town. But it was a nice warm good-feeling quiet.