

Travelsted and Gordo had quite a collection of friends!

# THE TROPHY HUNTERS

LEE WINTERS STORY

by **Lon Williams**



Winters leaned his back against Bogie's bar and hoisted his elbows.

**D**EPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters, homeward bound near sundown, rode onto that high, desolate region known to gold-diggers as Renwick Notch. Gallitena Gulch, where he had gone in search of his latest wanted monkey, lay westward, its shacks and sluices deep within a wilderness of cliffs and windy peaks.

This was forbidding country. Hoof-beats stirred cliff-to-cliff echoes that pattered like hailstones; rock monstrosities at intervals rounded and elongated themselves into trumpets, through which winds blew eerily. Oddly, too, there were places left undisturbed by leapfrogging storms. Winters had turned a cliff into one of those ghostly solitudes, when his horse Cannon Ball reared and spun half-around on his hind legs. When at last quieted, Cannon Ball faced about and advanced

skittishly.

Then, through smell, Winters detected possible cause for Cannon Ball's violent behavior. An atmosphere of death filled this secluded area, its odors both chemical and organic, as if all nature, not merely a human body, had been embalmed. Winters shuddered, thought of turning back; movement or noise here approached graveyard sacrilege.

He pushed on, however, until Cannon Ball stopped again, his body a-quiver. On a shelving rock ahead a black-robed figure sat upon a stool, by first appearance a dejected vulture, but identified seconds later as a human being, whose eyes followed horse and rider with eager fascination as they approached, then stopped.

A flattish, yet strangely cultured voice croaked

downward. "Ah-ha! Greetings, my friend."

Winters' right hand rested close to his gun. "Howdy," he replied.

With his robe, black hair, pointed beard and leering eyes, this stranger resembled Winters' boyhood concept of Satan. His speech suggested both cruelty and cunning. "You have an odd look about you, Officer Whoever-you-be, as if you doubted my reality."

"Yeah?" said Winters. "If it concerns you, I'm Deputy Marshal Lee Winters of Forlorn Gap."

"Ah! From that haunted, empty town, are you? But I shall not be outdone in courtesy; I am Marcus Aurelius Travelsted, and I've a right famous history. Eh?" He lifted his eyebrows and smiled.

Winters swept a quick glance round. "Maybe I'll learn more about that history, Travelsted." He gave his head a sideways nod. "That log cabin back in yon nook—yours?"

Travelsted's expression changed from one of leering banter to one of wild, distant dreaminess. "Do not belittle my palace, Officer Winters; that is Marble Hall. Have you never dreamed you dwelt in marble halls? Of course you have. Pray dismount and abide with me. You made a picturesque figure as you approached, leathered astride your big, spirited horse. And that somber face of yours—ah, it would be unique and memorable among my collection of friends."

Suddenly a cold sweat popped out on Winters. "Among your what?"

Travelsted stared insanely. "My collection, certainly. But please do not further disturb my thoughts, Winters." He indicated a frame and canvas. "You may think I'm painting a sunset scene, but I'm not. What I seek to capture here and forever imprison in line and color is something more elusive than light; rarer, too, than gold-tinted mountain peaks." He moved a hand slowly in a half-circle. "Above these unremembered and nameless dead lonely spirits their silent vigils keep, to my searching eyes yet un beholden. But despair ye not; someday I shall commune with them, face to face."

Winters sleeved sweat from his forehead. Loonies like this Travelsted always scared him stiff. Moreover, at Travelsted's feet lay a rifle, almost on a level with Winters' nose. Travelsted's right foot slid it round until Winters could see into its muzzle. Anticipating action but few heartbeats removed, Winters giggered his horse's flank. Sand

and rocks dusted backward as Cannon Ball leaped and lunged forward. Jutting cliffs intervened between Winters and impending death. Cannon Ball clattered away among their shadows, and Winters once more breathed freely.

**I**N FORLORN GAP, after-supper patronage had grown in Doc Bogannon's saloon. Bogannon himself was busy serving drinks and cleaning glasses. He was a large individual, with thick dark hair, intellectual forehead and genteel sparkle and poise. Easterners who stopped overnight at Goodlett Hotel and dropped in for drinks were surprised to see one so distinguished-looking in this undistinguished role of barkeep.

If Bogannon was self-conscious, he gave no indication of it. Nor was he a snob in either spirit or demeanor. To him, all travelers were interesting and to be treated with courtesy. Especially interesting were those whom he regarded as *characters*. There had never been a shortage of those off-brand creatures—magicians, beggars, clowns, dudes, strutting gunslingers, and queer odd-lots who gazed, leered, smiled, or contemplated him with deliberate patronage, scorn, or condescension.

Doc had just plunged glasses into hot water when he glanced up to find himself being watched. A large visitor with red hair and blue eyes scrutinized him coldly. "Sir," this character reminded him, "when Red Wolf appears at your bar, you shouldn't keep him waiting. How'd you like it if I lifted my six-guns and clipped your ears?"

Bogannon steadied his nerves. "I certainly wouldn't like that, Mr. Red Wolf. My apology, and I trust your great heart will forgive me."

"Well!" said Red Wolf, pleased. "You're of good breeding. I accept a drink as a token both of your big-heartedness and of mine."

"Good," said Doc. He filled a glass with whiskey and observed quietly while Red Wolf guzzled it.

"I never pay for drinks," Red Wolf informed him meanly. "If that's what you're waiting for, you can proceed with your squaw work."

Doc arched his heavy eyebrows. "I was never one to argue over payment for a drink. If a man's not gentleman enough to pay, he has his reasons. A man of your obviously excellent background has some better name than Red Wolf, however."

“Sir, I’m Colby Laycock; does that mean anything?”

Bogie narrowed one eye. “Sounds aristocratic enough. You wouldn’t happen to be a Boston Laycock, would you?”

“Sir, I’ve been practically everywhere except Boston. Want to make something of it?”

“Indeed, no. It’s a pleasure to meet somebody like you who *isn’t* from Boston.”

Lacking excuse to shoot somebody, Red Wolf was looking for suitable inanimate targets, when Bogannon’s batwings swung inward and a lean, hard-looking personage with a star on his vest strode in.

“Winters!” exclaimed Bogannon. “Am I glad to see you!”

Winters strode up and slapped down a coin. “Wine, Doc.”

Bogannon responded eagerly. “You look right pale, Winters. Seen a ghost, or something?”

“Just *something*, Doc; no ghost.” Winters lifted his glass and washed his dry throat. His roving glance rested upon Colby Laycock, whose fingers twitched above his guns. “Who’s he, Doc?”

“Excuse my bad manners,” replied Bogie. “Winters, meet my two-gun friend Colby Laycock, known also as Red Wolf. Laycock, Deputy Marshal Lee Winters.”

“Red Wolf, eh?” Winters drawled, unimpressed. “Well, he’s at least red.”

“Yeah?” snarled Laycock. “I don’t feel complimented, being introduced to this star-toter; fact is, I spit on deputy marshals.”

WINTERS, seeing that Laycock didn’t spit, leaned his back against Bogie’s bar and hoisted his elbows. “You know, Doc, years ago a neighbor of ours nine miles across Trinity River bottoms down in Texas named Joshuaway Dingle had Susan Jane for wife. Sort of close, Josh was. Good house, but sorry fixin’s. One spring Susan Jane secretly painted and furnished what she meant for a parlor. One day she told Josh she had a surprise to show him. It was that nice room. When Josh had took a good look, Susan Jane said, ‘Well, Joshuaway, ain’t you got nothin’ to say?’ Josh held quiet for a spell, then said, ‘All I got ter say is, it’s a good place to spit.’ And he spit on Susan Jane’s new rug—hit it square amidships.”

“Shame!” exclaimed Bogie.

“You didn’t let me finish, Doc,” drawled

Winters. “I was aimin’ to say, that was Josh Dingle’s last spit.”

“Ought to be a moral to that story,” declared Bogie stoutly.

Winters gave Red Wolf a cold glance. “Yeah, Doc. Moral is, you want to be careful where you spit.”

Laycock’s sneer revealed large, even teeth. “Maybe you think that’s funny; well, I don’t.”

“Shows you’ve got good sense,” said Winters. “I don’t think it’s funny, either; never did.” He turned and planked down another coin. “Give Wolf a drink, Doc, with my compliments. Good night.”

As his batwings swung, Bogie filled Laycock’s glass. “A fine officer, is Winters. Free-hearted, too.”

Laycock eased up and lifted his refill. “You noticed he got out right quick, didn’t you? If he was looking for me, he was scared to say so.”

Bogie’s reply was intercepted by a table customer who rose and approached with solemn gaze fixed upon Laycock. And here was, indeed, a character. Doc had seen his sort in circuses—easy, resilient, sure of motion, powerful of muscle, self-confident. This one had curly blond hair, ruddy features, with face and body that approached creative perfection. But, unhappily, his expression was of a sort Doc had seen in bughouses—intense, unstable, hypnotic.

“You will pardon my intrusion,” he said to Laycock in a soft, persuasive voice. “I saw with what coolness you faced that uncouth and ill-mannered officer. Long study of human traits convinced me that you are not only brave, but audacious and resourceful, as well. Therefore, let me introduce myself as an admirer and potential friend. I am Prof. James Rosamond Gordo, long known as America’s foremost trapeze artist.”

Red Wolf’s upper lip lifted at one corner. “You don’t say!”

“Pardon me,” said Bogannon. “I happened to overhear that. Let me say, I’ve seen Professor Gordo perform. In his day he was truly famous—a great teacher as well as performer.”

A customer yelled for whiskey, and Bogie excused himself. When he was free again, he looked just in time to see Gordo and Laycock leaving. He scratched a corner of his high forehead. He was not habitually curious, but those two intrigued him. If memory could be depended on, that Gordo had been committed to a lunatic asylum

back East. He could have been worried about Laycock, but wasn't. Characters came and went; some never returned. But such was life in Forlorn Gap; here today, tomorrow gone and forgotten.

**O**UTSIDE, Gordo and Laycock glanced cautiously about, then mounted horses and rode out of town together. They turned northward onto Pangborn Road, where conversation was resumed.

Red Wolf asked, "How did you know I was wanted?"

"Quite easy," Gordo replied softly. "I read your mind."

"Huh!" Red Wolf scoffed. But soon he asked nervously, "This place of yours, how far is it?"

"Twelve miles, or so," replied Gordo. "Ideal for your purposes—and ours. It is not strictly an outlaw's den, though my partner and I do collect outlaws from time to time. If robbery of a Pangborn stage is indicated as desirable, there are gorges not too distant where it can be executed with small risk. Sheltered with us, you will have no fear of being apprehended. Miners in Gallitena Gulch can make handsome contributions to your treasures now and then. Moreover, you will be within twenty miles of Elkhorn Road, where stages pass day and night; ah, you'll be in a robber's paradise, my friend."

Unaccountably Laycock was growing nervous. "I want no partners, though," he declared. "I've played a lone hand. Done well at it, too. A man like me rides a lonesome road, but it's a safe road."

"True," said Gordo. "But even a lone wolf needs a place to hide. At our refuge, you can easily disappear and never be seen again."

"Just what I'm right now looking for," Laycock admitted. "Owners of that last stagecoach I robbed would give a thousand dollars for my head."

Gordo laughed softly. "Ha! But they'll never get it."

Eight miles north of Forlorn Gap they came, to a stony, moonlit canyon that wound upward and westward. There they turned, and immediately strange and new eagerness animated Gordo's speech and action.

"I am not a stage robber by choice," he declared, "though men will survive—by lawful methods, or otherwise. Preferably I am a hunter, pursuing danger for thrills, not for wealth. I am a man of science, too, exceptionally learned in preservatives, fixation of likenesses, glorified

taxidermy, and modern arts of mummifying bodies and faces that belong to history."

Laycock said tightly, "I'm afraid you're over my head, Gordo. All this talk sounds stuffy to me."

Gordo chuckled and patted his horse's neck. "Stuffy? Right clever, Laycock. Stuffing is, indeed, a term vulgarly applied to my art; and properly, if you have in mind boyish amateurs who stuff owl-skins with straw, or rabbits with sawdust. Applied to my art, however, such a term is utterly slanderous, for when I have finished with a specimen it looks as natural and as like itself as it did in life. Why, your closest friends would think you were still alive."

Laycock gulped. "Yeah?"

Gordo dropped back slightly. "Excuse my metaphors, Laycock; figures of speech are sometimes too suggestive."

Laycock glanced over his shoulder. "Just what I was thinking. Maybe your hideout ain't what I'm looking for, after all." He let his right hand slide down.

Something clicked under Gordo's coat. "To prejudice is often to commit error, Mr. Laycock. If you should go for your gun, for instance, I should attribute your instant death to a worse error. Ride on, and you shall travel unmolested."

**T**HEY WERE in a high, narrow defile, where jutting cliffs made their trail winding and shadowed. But presently they emerged, and an area of walled-in flat and strangely scented calm spread before them. From a cabin in a nook a lighted window extended reassurance.

Laycock asked in scornful tone, "Is that it?"

"It is," Gordo replied softly.

"But you said—"

"Yes, I said we lived at Marble Hall, and so we do. What you see is merely its entrance. Much lies beyond; hence, you have a treat coming. My partner, who is both artist and poet, can describe your destiny in words of rhythm and rose-petal beauty, whereas my art is in my fingers. If you are afraid, Laycock, then I have misjudged you, for I took you to be a man without fear."

"Sure," said Laycock in bragging accent. "Sure, I'm not afraid; come on."

He urged his horse forward.

A dark figure emerged from Gordo's cabin. "Ah, there! Welcome to Marble Hall."

"Greetings," returned Gordo. When Laycock

had swung down, he followed. "Marcus, our new acquisition, Mr. Colby Laycock, more appropriately and adventurously known as Red Wolf. Laycock, my partner, Marcus Aurelius Travelsted."

"Ah!" Travelsted exclaimed. "Red Wolf! How appropriate. Do come right in, gentlemen." He bowed and beckoned to Laycock.

Laycock stepped inside and drew his guns. When Gordo and Travelsted had walked in, he commanded sharply, "Put 'em up!"

They lifted their hands, looked puzzled rather than scared. Travelsted glanced in mock reproach at his partner. "Rosamond, what have you brought here?"

"I thought I was bringing a friend," replied Gordo. "Also, I was certain this fugitive from justice needed friends—and a hideout."

"He proves ungrateful." Travelsted regarded Red Wolf humorously. "Laycock, put up your guns; you are among friends. However, if you intend to shoot us, proceed at once."

"Whether I shoot, depends," said Laycock. "Maybe I'm going to like this hideout. Maybe I'll want it alone; maybe I'll want it in company."

Travelsted nodded at Gordo. "If your friend desires our place, it is his. Though we are all fugitives from justice, you and I can live elsewhere, if we must." In disregard of Laycock's guns, he crossed to a sideboard. "Let us drink together, then we shall come to terms." He brought three glasses of wine to a crude, round table, arranged three rustic chairs and bowed to Laycock. "You will do us honor."

Laycock nodded to Gordo. "You first, mister."

Gordo chose one of three places and waited. Travelsted posted himself at another, and smiled. "Our best chair for our guest, of course."

"One minute," said Laycock. He holstered his right-hand gun, reached under Gordo's coat and drew out a six-shooter. "Thought I heard a gun-hammer click as we rode in."

"I have no weapon, of course," said Travelsted.

"I don't trust strangers," said Laycock. He walked back of Travelsted and patted all likely points of concealment. "Now," he concluded, "you move to that next chair; I'm taking yours."

Travelsted looked hurt, but he moved. They sat down.

"You're shrewd and cautious," Travelsted commented, "but you failed in one respect, Mr.

Laycock. There could have been a hunter's game-net above your head."

Laycock looked up. Travelsted's table-top revolved. Gordo and Travelsted exchanged satisfied glances; a different glass of wine now stood before their guest.

Gordo looked at Laycock reproachfully. "You see, we are not betrayers of friends, as your suspicious mind surmised. I almost regret having taken you into my confidence." Gordo picked up his glass, drank generously.

Travelsted also drank. "Do not be too harsh with our guest, Rosamond. Had he not been of wary disposition, he'd never have survived his many adventures."

Red Wolf took his glass, sipped lightly, then tossed off a big swallow. "Travelsted's right," he said, enlivened by praise and wine. "And one thing I always do, is take command until I know everybody around can be trusted." He lifted his glass and drank until it was empty. "And now," he added, "I want to see those marble halls Gordo bragged about." He got up, hands alert.

Gordo and Travelsted finished their drinks and rose.

"Certainly," said Travelsted. He crossed leisurely to a door, pulled it open, and they were admitted to an adjoining room. Inside they paused.

Red Wolf stared in horror. Fastened to suspended boards were mounted heads: bear, buffalo, elk, badger, panther, lynx, and others in great number. In addition to those there was a more gruesome assortment. Human heads! Bearded gold-diggers, a youth, an Indian, two Chinamen, a thin, half-bald character with a long nose, an Indian squaw.

Red Wolf stared, terrified. His eyes began to haze over; his body shook, convulsed with waves not alone of horror. He reached for his guns, closed on their handles. But he could not lift them. He screamed, "Help! I'm poisoned. Somebody hellllllp!"

As he sank, Gordo and Travelsted grabbed his arms. "Well, of course," they said.

Travelsted leered gleefully at Laycock's rolling eyes. "In our collection we had no red wolf. You see, therefore, how welcome you are at Marble Hall."

Laycock saw their monstrous faces above him. But he was helpless; he convulsed again, and sighed.

**H**OME EARLY, Lee Winters had supper with his wife Myra. Afterwards they sat before a crackling fireplace and Myra read aloud from a book. It was, she said, an ancient history, ancient because it dealt with times long past.

“Just one moment,” Winters interrupted. “Are you sure that’s history, or something made up?”

Myra lowered her book. “Lee, of course it’s history. If it isn’t, people have certainly been fooled.”

Winters looked at his wife, interest divided between her book about people long dead and Myra’s own attributes of living beauty. “You know, Myra, since I got you for a wife, I’m becoming downright educated. But I’ve got my doubts about those old-time kings who put rings in men’s noses and cut people’s heads off just to have fun.”

Myra smiled proudly. Remembering how her hunger for books had gone unsatisfied until she married Lee Winters, it pleased her that Winters listened to her reading and comments. She said, “Lee, it was not all done for fun. Kings usually beheaded people they didn’t like, or wanted to rob, or were afraid of. Yet it’s true, according to history, that kings—like other humans—sometimes went crazy and derived insane pleasure from murder and cruelty.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Well, read on.”

He closed his eyes and listened again. It was not easy to retain fixed attention, and so his mind wandered from ancient kings, gibbets, bloody chopping-blocks and torture machines to pictures of wanted monkeys and a vulture-like creature on a ledge in Renwick Notch. After all, he supposed, humanity had not changed so very much. It was just a piece of luck that kings no longer had so much power, like they’d had in ancient times. Sure, there were mean individuals still, but a man could shoot them, if he had to, and thus save his head from being removed, his eyes gouged out, or his hands cut off.

Winters awoke with a start. He’d dreamed a rope was being drawn round his neck. Happily, it was only Myra’s arm.

“Bedtime, Lee.”

But he was troubled, and for two days he had premonitions of danger on his solitary excursions. Then a letter came from Marshal Huge Landers at Brazerville. It contained a picture of a wanted monkey known by various aliases, but most

notoriously as Red Wolf.

Hugo’s letter said: *Dear Winters. Red Wolf is believed to be in your bailiwick, which obligates you to get him. There’s a reward of one thousand dollars, open to officers and civilians alike, for Red Wolf dead or alive. Be careful. He’s killed two bank clerks, five stage guards and at least seven unclassified citizens. Yours truly, Hugo Landers, Marshal. P.S. Watch out for cuckoos. Some real bad ones are at large.*

Winters wanted no truck with cuckoos or with that murdering scoundrel Red Wolf either. Accordingly, he spent three days going to where Red Wolf in particular was least likely to be. Included in his official duties was search for one Tal Kaner, who’d escaped by murder of a jail guard at Brazerville. Winters looked for him at Pedigo Ranch, Dead Horse Pass, Fudge Around Gulch, Hoodoo, and Rocky Point. He found him at Cow Creek, outdrew him and surrendered what was left of him to three of Hugo’s deputies, who took him back to Brazerville for hanging.

He made no inquiry concerning Colby Laycock, alias Red Wolf. But on his ride in from Cow Creek at night across Alkali Flat, he remembered Hugo’s order and could think of no excuse for further evasion. Eeriness of Alkali Flat made him sweat, what with its queer noises and imagined spooks, but he held fast to his budding resolution to do something about Red Wolf. That resolution was running strong when his hands once more touched Doc Bogannon’s swinging doors and he again heard Bogie’s joyful greeting.

“Winters!”

**W**INTERS advanced and slapped down a coin. “Wine, Doc.”

“With pleasure,” Bogie responded. “You’ve got alkali dust on your clothes, Winters; see any ghosts?”

“Too early for ghosts, Doc. Midnight is spook-time on Alkali Flat.” While Bogie poured wine, Winters had a look at customers. There were eleven, but no redhead. As usual there were queer ones, some obvious toughs, but none whose face looked familiar or wanted. Winters turned, picked up his glass and drank. “Business been right heavy, Doc?”

“Excellent, Winters.”

“Any carrot-tops?”

Bogie wrinkled his forehead. “Don’t recall

any.”

“But you do recall a big-size redhead named Red Wolf?”

Bogie reflected vigorously, at last remembered. “Ah, yes. Laycock, you mean; that two-gun gentleman who spits on deputy marshals.”

“Yeah, Doc; seen him lately?”

Bogie shook his head. “Don’t tell me he’s a wanted monkey?”

“He is, Doc, and with a thousand iron-wheels on his red noggin.”

Bogie stared. He’d espied one James Rosamond Gordo, wild-eyed ex-gymnast and trapeze artist. Bogie crooked a finger and Gordo came bouncing forward, eyes staring.

“Gordo,” smiled Doc, “meet my friend Deputy Marshal Lee Winters; Winters, James Rosamond Gordo.”

“A pleasure,” smiled Gordo.

“Howdy,” said Winters. He did not shake hands. Intuition cautioned him that here might be one of those cuckoos Hugo Landers had warned against.

Bogie continued, “Winters wishes to locate a certain badman known as Red Wolf; possibly you can render assistance, Gordo.”

Gordo’s eyes narrowed, but soon they grew even wider than before. “Ah, yes, indeed. I know right where Red Wolf is staying. Is a reward offered for his capture?”

“There is,” said Winters. “And if you bring him in, it’s all yours.”

Gordo thought, but shook his head. “That isn’t quite in my line, Winters; but I’ll gladly render assistance, without charge.” He made a bold and fascinated study of Lee’s face and features. “Merely having you as friend and companion, Winters, would be reward enough for me. Shall we go?”

Bogannon left them to answer a call for whiskey. When he returned, they were leaving. Premonition struck him then. Others besides Red Wolf had left with Gordo and never come back.

“Winters, wait!”

Bogie ran after them. They were mounting their horses when he got outside.

“Winters, I want to talk to you.”

“Another time, Doc,” said Winters.

“Of course,” said Gordo. “Perhaps sometime Mr. Bogannon himself would enjoy an evening ride. A fine specimen he’d be, anywhere.”

“But, Winters—”

Winters giggled his horse. “Be seeing you, Doc.”

Bogie watched them ride off, his sadness heavy. But he shook his head and went back inside.

WINTERS and Gordo headed north. After eight miles of fast riding, they swung into a canyon that ran westward. As their trail rose and narrowed, Gordo drew rein and sought to drop behind. But Winters never knowingly permitted danger to come at his back. He applied his boot-toe to Gordo’s horse, kept him lunging forward.

“Something wrong?” Winters asked at last.

“Oh, no,” said Gordo.

“Your horse seems to have fits. Or maybe you can’t make up your mind whether you want to go before or behind?”

“That’s quite immaterial.”

“With me,” said Winters, “it makes a heap of difference. So, I reckon you can just quit trying to drop behind.”

Gordo fell silent. But when they reached a walled-in flat with unpleasant, yet familiar smells, he again slowed. He had a pretext this time. A lighted window glowed warmly ahead.

“Your quarry is there, Winters. Now that I have done what I promised to do—”

“But you haven’t done it,” retorted Winters. “Ride on.”

A cabin door opened and a black-robed figure emerged, outlined distinctly by moonlight. “Ah, there! Do we have a visitor, Rosamond?”

“A visitor, Marcus, but I fear a distrustful one.”

“Oh, no need for distrust. Come right up.”

“Very well, Marcus.” Gordo rode ahead and dismounted.

Winters followed and after a cautious survey swung down. “So we’re at Marble Hall once more; you didn’t tell me about this, Gordo. Travelsted and I also meet again.”

“And most pleasantly, I trust,” Travelsted responded. He bowed and waved a hand. “Welcome to Marble Hall.”

“After you,” said Winters. He nodded at Gordo. “After you, too.”

They entered. Winters followed, alert for surprises. But inside he saw nothing alarming. Except for sickening odors, their cabin appeared crudely homelike. Travelsted moved across to a shelf of wine bottles and glasses, and Gordo stood behind a chair at a small, round-topped table.

Travelsted brought three glasses of wine, which

he set in front of as many chairs. He nodded. "Be seated, Winters. Our best chair is always for our guest."

"I never accept special favors," said Winters. "Nor do I set with an unexplored room at my back. I swap with you, Travelsted."

"Suspicion ill-becomes our honored guest," said Travelsted. "But, as you wish." He exchanged places with Winters, and they sat down.

Travelsted smiled amusedly. "Rosamond, our guest is shrewd. I'm surprised, however, that he did not look over his head, lest there be a net that might fall and enclose him."

Winters threw back his head and looked up. There was no net, but he had glimpsed a movement, heard an extremely faint squeak. His wine glass which had rested upon a snarl near a knot, now rested upon open-grained wood, but almost in exact relation to a similar knot. Carefully, but in feigned awkwardness, he leaned forward, ascertained that he sat before a table-top that would revolve.

Suddenly he stared, shouted, "That door! I saw a ghost!" He shoved his chair a few inches backward and drew his six-gun; but all he did to these loonies was give their table-top a one-third turn, which put it back to its original position.

Gordo and Travelsted had been caught off guard. Puzzled, they stared at each other, then at Winters. They became wary, but only of Winters' gun.

"What does he mean by ghost?" asked Gordo.

"I'd've sworn I saw Red Wolf's ghost," said Winters.

Travelsted forced a laugh. "Red Wolf, ha! Red Wolf is enjoying a calm and undisturbed repose, Winters. Did you wish to see him?"

"Red Wolf is a wanted man," said Gordo. "Winters has come to arrest him."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Travelsted. "Then it's no wonder Winters is unnerved; drink your wine, Winters, and you'll feel better."

**G**ORDO LIFTED his glass and drank deeply. Travelsted did likewise. Winters picked up his glass but immediately put it down again. He sniffed. "You know, this place smells like carrion. What kind of business do you carry on here?"

Tense silence followed.

Then Travelsted put down his glass slowly. A

ghastly look was on his face. "Rosamond! Rosamond! A terrible mistake has been made."

Gordo glanced, horrified, at Travelsted's depleted glass. "You mean—"

"Yes, yes, that is what I mean. Winters has tricked us." Travelsted placed his hands on his chair as if to rise. His fingers trembled. He stared at Gordo; his trembling became frantic. He cried, "Avenge me, Rosamond; avenge me."

Winters had seen a gun-bulge in Gordo's coat. Had he not anticipated Gordo's move by an instant, he would have been too late. Gordo was fast, but Winters' gun roared and Gordo's went off in its holster.

When Gordo slumped, Travelsted rose, a long knife drawn. He moved forward unsteadily, but driven hard by vengeance. "I shall kill you, Winters. Your bullets won't stop me; I am immortal."

Winters had got up. He backed away, his gun-hand stayed by some force beyond his understanding.

Travelsted commenced to gasp. "Yes, I shall kill—kill—kill—" He drew back for a desperate plunge but stopped. His eyes rolled, his legs failed. He fell and writhed horribly. Winters watched until Travelsted's struggle had ended, then holstered his gun and wiped sweat from his forehead.

**D**OC BOGANNON was alone in his saloon. Midnight had arrived; heavy drinkers had departed. Bogie had reached up to extinguish his bar light when his batwings swung inward.

"Winters!"

Winters wagged a gunnysack in his left hand. He went to a chair, dropped his burden and sat down. "Two glasses and wine, Doc."

Bogie hurried, sat down and poured drinks. "Winters, I've been worried sick about you. Where've you been?"

"Been after Red Wolf, Doc."

Bogie sighed. "Did you find him?"

Winters swallowed a big drink and backhanded his mustache. "Take a look in that sack."

Bogie drew Winters' gunnysack around, spread it open and looked in. "Ow! Winters, it's his head."

Winters finished his drink and held his glass for a refill. "Yeah, Doc. And I've got to lug that thing clear to Brazerville. It's disgustin' what a deputy marshal has to do to make a livin'."