



Winter wasn't sure just what he saw over yonder.

**D**EPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters drifted into Forlorn Gap shortly before midnight with mind confused and troubled. His gunfight at Hoodoo with a wanted monkey named Scugg Amory had left him unnerved, his imagination conditioned for strange adventures.

At a sharp bridle pull, his horse Cannon Ball and their moon-cast shadow halted dustily. Good reason, there was, for such behavior. From an old building known in Forlorn Gap's uproarious days as Bodep Opera House, desultory singing was distinctly audible. Beyond its half-open door, light could be seen. Such as might have diffused itself from some hidden, over-large glowworm.

That singing voice was feminine, young, enchanting. Its quality of casual ease suggested that its owner sang for her own amusement, the way the deputy's wife, Myra, often did while cooking meals. As in other eerie situations, Winters told himself that this was something imagined. No entertainment had been offered here for three or four years. Bodep's was deserted, its glory but hazily remembered.

## THE BANSHEE SINGER

by Lon Williams

**They said that the Bodep Opera House in Forlorn Gap was haunted, that a murdered opera singer awaited the man who had slain her there. And that man was believed to be Jason Inbred—the very gent whom Lee Winters had been assigned to track down!**

Yet while he listened and argued with himself, a creepy feeling made Lee Winters sleeve his face; uneasiness urged him to get away quickly. Afterwards he refused to look back, fearful of what he might have seen.

Two blocks from Bodep's, Forlorn Gap's only remaining saloon still had its lights going. Inside, its owner, Doc Bogannon, put away glasses in readiness for his customary midnight closing. Bogannon himself was of distinguished appearance—tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair, broad forehead, and features which suggested high intelligence. Clearly nature had endowed him for great things. Nevertheless, for reasons undisclosed, Doc had chosen to make his way in this far-off, lonely town and live contentedly with his half-breed Shoshone wife.

He had reached up to extinguish his bar light when his batwings swung inward and a slim weather-beaten individual with dark mustache, spurs and six-gun strode in. "Winters!" he cried joyously. "Am I glad to see you!"

Winters advanced and slapped down his tribute.

“Wine, Doc.”

“Wine it is, Winters.”

As Bogannon reached for glass and bottle, a high-pitched, complaining voice raised itself. “You couldn’t make that two glasses now, could you, Mr. Bogannon?”

Winters turned and stared at a small-faced, seated critter of about fifty. “Who’s your cuckoo, Doc?”

“My apology,” said Bogannon. “He isn’t cuckoo, exactly. Rather, he’s afflicted with what you might call dreams. His name—and I’m not joking, Winters—is Rub Elbow.”

“Nothing uncommon about that,” returned Winters. “When I was a water-sprout down in Texas, we had a neighbor some thirty miles across Trinity Bottoms called Standin Fencecorner. Always seemed to me right proper as a name.”

“Beyond question,” Bogannon nodded emphatically.

“Like I said,” Elbow persisted plaintively, “I’m not one to turn down whiskey or wine, once it’s offered.”

“Notwithstanding you’ve already bummed two glasses off me,” observed Bogannon.

**D**OC BOGANNON had poured for Winters. Lee picked up his glass and headed for Rub Elbow’s table. “Fetch wine and two more glasses, Doc, they’re on me; I never could abide seeing anybody unhappy.”

Bogannon obliged promptly. Seated, he arched an eyebrow knowingly. “Elbow is troubled by dreams, Winters. If you were an astrologer or soothsayer, such talent might put you in great favor.”

Elbow drank and licked his lips. “Now, sir, I never said anything about dreams. I said it reminded me of something.”

Bogannon looked at Winters. “Elbow used to work at Bodep Opera House. Sort of butcher, baker and candlestick maker.”

“No such thing,” declared Elbow. “I was handy man. Wasn’t nothing I couldn’t do, give me proper tools.”

“Where’ve you been, and why’ve you come back?” asked Winters.

Elbow twisted his mouth. “Some people will ask questions or bust.”

“Elbow is not one to be squeezed of information,” Bogannon explained. “It germinates,

as a seed, from within.”

Elbow nodded appreciatively. “All right, now. As I was saying, I was in St. Louis. Had me a cabinet shop there, I did. When I heard he’d escaped—”

“Who escaped?” asked Winters.

“Officer Winters, who’s telling this, me or you?”

Bogannon interposed gently, “You are, of course, Mr. Elbow. Go right ahead.”

“All right,” said Elbow. “You see, I worked at Bodep’s when *she* was there.”

“She?” Winters asked suddenly.

Elbow looked his disdain. “Some people just don’t know when to keep their mouths shut.”

“As Doc would say, my apology,” Winters returned sourly.

Bogannon intervened again. “You know how it is with men, Mr. Elbow; mention of women excites them. However, Officer Winters meant no harm.”

Elbow drank his glass empty and watched approvingly while Doc refilled it. “Like I was saying, gentlemen,” he resumed in good humor, “this Jason Inbred was in federal prison for mail robbery. When I heard he’d escaped, I says to myself, ‘Rub Elbow, that reminds you of something.’

“That set me to thinking. ‘What is it, Rub?’ I says to myself. I can tell you one thing, gentlemen. When I put my mind to thinking, it’s katy-begone-doggie. First thing you know, I’ve got it figured.”

“I’d bet on that,” declared Bogannon. “Wouldn’t you, Winters?”

“But what about *she*?” demanded Winters.

“Didn’t I tell you, Mr. Bogannon?” Elbow complained angrily. “Some men, I don’t know whether they ain’t got no sense or ain’t got no manners.”

“I dare say that sometimes it’s both,” Bogannon commented, winking at Winters.

Elbow restored his equanimity with wine. “Yes, sir, gentlemen, Jason Inbred murdered her, but he didn’t get her jewelry. Do you know why? Well, sirs, one day Miss Neverland says to me, ‘Mr. Elbow,’ she says, ‘you’re one friend I can trust. I want you to build a secret panel in my dressing room, where I can hide my jewelry. If you don’t, some night while I’m singing somebody will steal me penniless.’ That’s what she says to me, gentlemen. That’s what I’m thinking when I hears he’s escaped from federal prison.

"I says to myself, 'Rub Elbow, Collinda Neverland had no kinfolks. Like others suspected of murder, I lit out, but nobody but me knowed where that jewelry was hid. According to law, finders is keepers.' Yes, sir, gentlemen, I'm bound to be rich."

Bogannon looked at his watch; its message alarmed him. "It's after midnight. I'm not superstitious, but no good can come of being open after twelve." He sprang up. "With your kind permission, gentlemen."

But again his batwings swung inward. This time they admitted a distinguished looking stranger of about thirty, with black mustache, pointed beard, and blue-green eyes.

He bowed gracefully. "Ah, sirs, I was afraid I'd be too late. Permit me, I am Ovid Train."

**W**INTERS chilled. Politeness and menace joined here in sinister alliance. Animal instinct made him slide his chair back in readiness for explosive action.

Bogannon said nervously, "I was just closing."

"Such inconvenience," said Train. He allowed his black coat to hang loose and expose an underarm gun. "It pains me deeply, but one glass of wine, if you please."

Winters nodded at Bogannon. "What are a couple of minutes, more or less, Doc?"

"Of course," said Bogannon. He came to life and hurried behind his bar; a glass tinkled.

Winters glanced at Rub Elbow, found him staring, frozen white.

Ovid Train, also, had looked at Elbow. When his eyes joined those of Winters again, a flicker of recognition was just leaving them. He said with mild contempt, "When one gentleman introduces himself, other gentlemen usually reciprocate."

Bogannon had set up a glass. "Your drink, sir."

"One moment," Train responded, his gaze fixed upon Winters.

Winters, though sweating, refused to be intimidated. "Find out as best you can, stranger."

"You are talking to Deputy Marshal Lee Winters," Bogannon interposed. "I am Doc Bogannon. Our small friend there is Mr. Elbow."

Train bowed stiffly and advanced for his drink. He emptied his glass, paid, and strode out.

Winters listened with relief to his retreating footsteps, then eyed Rub Elbow coldly. "You knowed that bozo, didn't you?"

Elbow swallowed and shook his head vigorously. "Never saw him before in my life. No, sir."

"You, Doc?"

Bogannon pulled down his bar lamp, blew out its flame, came round and reached up for another. He said shakily, "Winters, I'm almost as scared as Mr. Elbow. I will say, however, that Train has an angry, discouraging feature here and there which I certainly have seen before. But where?" Bogannon shook his head.

Winters gouged Rub Elbow and nodded for him to get out. When he was gone, Winters got up. "I'm confident both of you could've told me."

"Sorry, Winters, but I'm not sure. As a token of good faith, I'll put my mind to it, however."

"Yeah," Winters commented sarcastically. "And when you do, it'll be katy-begone-doggie. Goodnight."

**A**FTER SUPPER with his charming young wife, Winters sat quietly before their living room fireplace and watched golden embers do their antics.

Myra eased down beside him. "Worried, Lee?"

He started, then assumed boldness. "Why would I be worried?"

"I'll bite, why?"

"Being a mind-reader, maybe you can figure it."

"All right, I figure you've seen a ghost."

"Ghosts don't exist," he declared stoutly. "What may look like one has always some explanation."

"Then you *have* seen one."

"You're hard to get around, young lady," he said, secretly proud of her perception. "Well, I was just thinking about deserted houses. Bodep Opera House, for instance."

"Ah-ha," Myra exclaimed triumphantly, "so it was a ghost."

"You mean there's a ghost at Bodep's?"

"Well, of course; Bodep's is haunted by a singing banshee."

Lee's scalp tingled. "You don't say!"

"I thought everybody knew that."

He swallowed and backhanded his mustache. "Any notion who this banshee could be?"

"Certainly."

He stared at her. "As simple as that, eh?"

"Sure. It's Collinda Neverland."

"Why her?"

"Because she was murdered there. You

wouldn't remember; it's been over three years—happened before you came to Forlorn Gap. Collinda was a young singer, blue-eyed, blonde, dreamlike in beauty, yet with a smile which caused great division of opinion. Some said she smiled because she loved everybody, others that she was only amused, as if she regarded people as monkeys. This puzzle bothered nobody except a singer-actor named Jason Inbred; he settled it by murdering her."

"And got hung for it, no doubt?"

Myra shook her head. "He wasn't caught."

Winters mused for a while. "You went to Bodep's, I suppose?"

"Naturally. It was always crowded. Gold was plentiful then, and men who had it spent it."

"Gave this singer many presents, I reckon?"

"Everything imaginable. She had more jewels than one would know what to do with. Some thought it was to get her jewelry that Inbred murdered her; though others said it was from jealousy. Only one thing is certain—she was beautifully dead."

Winters tried to keep his thoughts practical. "You could no doubt describe both of them?"

Myra leaned forward and rested her chin prettily on her right hand. "Well, yes. Collinda was sort of small and slim, so full of life, too, that when she danced she seemed to float on air. Sometimes when she sang, she whirled round and round, which made her voice sound real spooky. Jason Inbred was medium tall, straight, slender, elegant, but cold-mannered, haughty, and had queerness in his face. People remarked about his queer look, especially after he had murdered Miss Neverland."

Lee was impressed by Myra's assurance respecting what she'd told him. Nevertheless, it contained what he regarded as woman's reasoning. He asked pointedly, "How do you know Jason Inbred murdered Collinda Neverland?"

She sat erect. "How do I know?" she replied archly. "Who else could have done it? He was her most persistent and ardent suitor; everybody knew that. She was found stabbed with a silver-plated dagger in her dressing room. It was his dagger. And he was never seen again. Isn't that proof enough?"

"Sure, sure," he answered. "That's proof aplenty. Which explains everything. Inbred murdered Collinda. Her ghost has come back to Bodep's to haunt him. But answer me this. How can she haunt him if he ain't there to be haunted?"

"I didn't say she was there to haunt her murderer, did I?"

"Oh, didn't you?"

"No, but I've got a sneaking notion; you've heard her singing, haven't you?"

"Nonsense!"

"And you've seen Jason Inbred, too, haven't you?"

"You ought to been a lawyer." He got up and patted her head. "Let's go to bed."

**N**EXT MORNING he was riding toward his office when he came upon a group of gold-diggers near Pepper Neal's store. They had formed a circle and were looking down.

Winters stopped his horse and peered over their heads. "What have you got there?"

Some drew back so he could see.

"It's a man, Winters," a miner told him. "Been tortured and strangled. See that cord round his neck?"

"Looks dead, don't he?" said Winters.

"He's as dead as he looks. Know him, Winters?"

Lee swung off for a closer look at his battered, bloody face. "Maybe some of you remember him. He's Rub Elbow."

Big Moss Tyner stared. "Sure, I remember; Elbow used to make hisself handy around Bodep Opera House."

Another said, "Elbow left these parts years ago."

Lee remounted. "Whatever his other business, right now it's with an undertaker. You men take care of it."

He continued to his office, searched through pictures of wanted monkeys, at last found what he sought—a print of Jason Inbred. He went to Doc Bogannon's saloon and showed Doc Bogie what he'd found.

"That's Inbred all right," declared Bogannon. "I remember him as a character actor. Talented impersonator. Could sing, as well."

"Any resemblance to Ovid Train?"

Bogannon mused. "Yes, I'd say so; with mustache and whiskers, Inbred might favor Train considerably."

Winters folded his poster and stored it in his vest. "Did you know your friend Rub Elbow got murdered last night?"

Bogannon was shocked. "No!"

"I figured he and Train knowed each other, Doc."

"There was sign of recognition; I noticed it myself."

"Another thing," said Winters. "I figure what brought Elbow back, also brought Train. It was a treasure hunt, Doc. Elbow knowed where it was hid. Got it tortured out of him; then strangled for silence."

Bogannon turned to a shelf. "Which reminds me, Winters: This letter came on Brazerville stage last night. 'Twas sent over this morning from Goodlett Hotel."

Winters tore into it and read aloud:

*Dear Winters. Jason Inbred, in for mail robbery, has escaped prison. You'd know him. He used to play-act and sing in Forlorn Gap. Reported headed back there. Left word he won't be took alive. Take him, Winters. Yours truly. Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

"LOOK FOR Ovid Train and you'll get your man," said Bogannon. Winters considered briefly. "Maybe I don't want him, Doc."

"I can well understand that. Perhaps if you'd wait around town—"

"Or go home and hide," Winters cut in. "No, Doc, I reckon I've got to track him down."

Several hours he searched in Forlorn Gap, then he learned that a man answering Train's description had ridden north early that morning. Having murdered Rub Elbow, Train likely would hide for a while. If low on funds, he'd be robbing somebody at a distance. His search of Bodep Opera House could wait, now that Elbow was dead.

In late afternoon, his search extended northward, Winters pulled Cannon Ball up short on a high mountain trail that overlooked Pangborn Road. A stagecoach drawn by four black horses and swinging round curves toward Pangborn Gulch had caught his attention.

Immediately he witnessed such a drama as he'd heard of, but had never before seen. A lone rider emerged from behind a ledge and signaled a halt with one shot from his forty-five. Within seconds a gun-guard was shot, a stage robbed of its mailbag and passengers of their valuables. Winters was too far away to intervene, yet close enough to observe important details.

That lone robber who calmly sat his horse and

watched his victims disappear, held himself like Ovid Train. Removal of his mask disclosed Train's pointed black beard. His gun had gone into an underarm holster.

Another significant detail was not overlooked. Train did not ride on Pangborn Road, but turned into a canyon, one remembered by Winters as having a dead end.

Descent to Pangborn Road required circuitous riding of about three miles. Dusk had fallen before Winters reached Train's hideout trail. Meantime, however, Winters had thought of a plan. Train, unaware of pursuit, would build a campfire at dark. That campfire would be his betrayer.

Winters moved cautiously. Memory told him there was a drip spring some miles ahead. There likely was where Train would camp. When a hundred yards from its location, Winters dismounted, ground-hitched and advanced on foot.

Wood smoke gave warning. Soon afterwards he glimpsed firelight. With six-gun drawn and cocked, he leaped round a shoulder of rock. "Don't move," he commanded fiercely.

Surprise reacted quickly in both directions. What Winters saw was not his handsomely attired robber. Instead, a man with bush whiskers and a prospector's baggy, scuffed shirt, trousers and boots stared at him, startled and puzzled.

"Don't skeer me like that, stranger. Old man Tweed Eadle ain't got nothin' you want."

Winters, though likewise startled, retained his guard. "Sorry, old-timer. You ain't him I expected to find."

"I'd hope to say not. Old Tweed Eadle shore never bothered nobody. Set in and have a bite of broiled venison. It ain't frequent that two visitors drop by in one night."

"Two?" said Winters.

Eadle nodded. "Two. First was him as looked in a hurry. Seeing that badge on your vest makes me think you're an officer, maybe chasin' that other feller."

"You guess right," said Lee. "I'm Deputy Marshal Lee Winters of Forlorn Gap."

"I'VE HEERD of you, Winters. It's said here and there you're right quick with that shootin'-iron of yours. I ain't one to meddle, whether business meddled with be lawful or unlawful, but I don't mind telling you something."

"Tell it, Eadle."

"It'll save you needless riding, Winters; you're on a cold trail. That feller you're after stopped by for a drink of water and asked how he could get to Fudge Around, then from there back to Forlorn Gap. Not knowing he was a badman I says to him, 'Well, stranger,' I says, 'you sure won't get to Fudge Around by riding further into this box canyon.' And he says to me, 'You mean this canyon is dead-ended?' And I says, 'You don't reckon I'd prospect these mountains for ten years and not find that out, do you?' That throwed him. You can figure what he done."

"What did he do?"

"Why, sir, he swung onto his horse and rode out of here."

Winters felt uneasy, sensed nervously that from some dark fissure a gun pointed toward him. Back of Tweed Eadle, unknown articles were wrapped in dirty canvas. Lee gazed suspiciously, then asked severely, "What did your other visitor look like?"

Eadle quietly turned his broiling steak. "Well, Winters, he was about as tall as you, but somewhat heavier. Much handsomer, too. Not such a dried-up strand of rawhide as you be. Maybe younger than you, too, but pushing thirty."

When he sensed danger he couldn't see, Winters figured that it was time to hightail. He backed slowly out of sight then despite darkness retreated at a brisk walk. When Cannon Ball was under him again, he made horse tracks.

He was hitching in front of Bogannon's before truth began to shine. "Be-confound!" he muttered angrily.

That scoundrel who'd called himself Tweed Eadle was Ovid Train in disguise. Winters had forgotten that Train, as Jason Inbred, had been an actor. Now that he remembered it, Eadle's voice had sounded strained; nor had disguise completely hidden his look of queerness.

Bogannon, alone at a table, looked up startled as his batwings swung inward. "Winters! I'd been wishing you'd come. Sit down; I'll fetch wine."

Satisfied no one else was present, Winters advanced and sat. "Doc, something's got you scared."

Bogannon returned and poured drinks. "Winters, lately I'm beginning to see things."

"Oh, see now, Doc," Winters scoffed. "Nobody but me ever sees things."

"It's nothing to be facetious about, Winters." Bogannon nodded toward an elevated cabinet

behind his bar. "Do you see that souvenir cabinet?"

Winters had known it was there, yet had never given it much thought. "Of course, I see it."

"And observe that its glass door is open?"

"Sure."

"Do you see that silver-plated dagger that was given to me by Marshal Hugo Landers himself?"

Winters stared and blinked. "Doc, it's gone."

"That was Jason Inbred's dagger. It killed Miss Collinda Neverland." Bogannon refilled their glasses. "You won't believe this, Winters, but unless I'm crazy it happened. Shortly before your arrival I was sitting here to rest from a busy evening, when my batwings swung in, as if a gust of wind had driven them open only to let them go again. I saw nothing. Seconds later that cabinet door swung open. My silver-plated dagger rose from its pegs and descended out of sight. Once more those batwings swung, this time outward." Bogannon wiped his face with a handkerchief. "Borrowing your own words, Winters, I don't figure it."

Winters sleeved his own face. "I don't figure it myself, Doc."

**B**OOTH OF them stilled at a distant sound of hoof beats. A horse galloped nearer and nearer, at last stopped at the hitch-rail. Batwings swung, and a man strode in. At sight of Winters he stopped and tensed for action.

"It's Ovid Train," Bogannon exclaimed with forced hospitality. "Join us, Train. You're just in time for a nightcap."

Winters, seated, had been caught unready. In a play for time, he nodded toward a chair opposite himself. "Set down, Train; drinks will be on me."

Train advanced haughtily and sat down. "I pay for my own, sir."

Winters had glimpsed Train's underarm gun. That its owner could kill in cold blood had been demonstrated on Pangborn Road. Duty required that he arrest this murderer, yet he hesitated, deterred by Train's flinty watchfulness.

Discretion warned that he should surprise his intended victim. To that end he said offhandedly, "You travel late, don't you?"

Train showed no friendliness. "Any laws against it?"

"Could be," replied Winters.

"Name one."

Winters calculated distances. Train's gun hand

was close to its weapon. Tension in Train's face warned that he might not wait for Winters to move first. Advantage was his. Lee's design to put Train off guard had failed. Effects were otherwise. Train was going to kill him. Though both of them would likely die, it was certain that Winters could not escape.

Bogannon had paused nearby with a glass for Train. Suddenly he eased it back on his bar.

Winters himself detected change. Jason Inbred, alias Ovid Train, had relaxed his guard; his attention shifted. Just when he'd had things his way, he assumed an attitude of rapt listening. His lips formed a word that emerged as a whisper.

"Collinda!"

Winters, too, relaxed his tension. Bogannon's place had filled with music. A girl was singing. Though it came from a distance, her voice was clear, distinct, incredibly sweet.

Slowly Train rose. Unmindful of Winters and Bogannon, he turned away and headed out, as one dreaming.

Nor was Winters immune to enchantment. Collinda Neverland was singing. That was certainty in his mind. Her ghostly voice was alive with promise. Its charm disturbed his contact with reality. It inspired visions of open gates, revealed wondrous lands beyond their portals. In fancy he felt himself within touch of blissful eternity.

He, too, got up. "Let's go, Doc."

Bogannon's voice shook. "No, Winters; what you hear is a song of death."

Winters, determined not to part with reality, felt drawn by tremendous forces, nevertheless. Bogannon's warning fell upon a mind willing, but unable, to receive it.

**O**UTSIDE, Winters paused briefly. Then, perceiving Train moving trancelike toward Bodep Opera House, he strode after him.

He was almost at Bodep's entrance, when he drew up resolutely. Train had disappeared inside. There was no certainty that Train would continue under a spell. Winters knew how easy it was to walk into a trap, how difficult it was to escape one.

Moonlight fell brightly round him. Despite his resolution to keep steady and alert, he was attended already by illusions of strangeness. Moonbeams seemed to quiver, as if shaken. Collinda's voice—he never considered that it could have been other than hers—continued its entrancing song. Its words

were foreign, and to him unimportant. What he heard was music. Sweet and eerie, mingled with this strange glory-light around him, it inspired forgetfulness, invited and drew him onward.

He entered. He advanced slowly not from caution, but because other power than his own held him in captivity.

Inside, he at first was aware only of vast, dark emptiness, with small patches illuminated by moonlight through high windows. Ovid Train stood in one of those patches.

Below them was a broad stage, dimly seen, its curtain raised, its rear screens arranged as for a play. Centrally thereon pale light glowed, an illumination unassociated with source or shadow. It was from that light that singing emanated. Winters, staring enraptured, thought he saw a young woman there. Certain he was that Bodep's gloom dissolved until walls, floor, old benches, even cobwebs, became visible, as in twilight.

For an instant he was sure he saw her, beautiful in shining white. It was in that instant that she stilled, except for her voice. When she moved, indistinctness resulted. As her song intensified to high excitement, that glow which surrounded her revolved, its central core became dense and brilliant.

Presently her voice rose and fell in evenly spaced variations of pitch. Dreamily Winters remembered what Myra had said. *When Collinda danced, she seemed to float on air. Sometimes when she sang, she whirled round and round, which made her voice sound real spooky.*

Suddenly Winters gasped. There, touched by light on a small table, lay Bogannon's souvenir—the silver-plated dagger.

Then, while Winters looked and listened, a change took place. Singing subsided. What he had seen as whirling light faded. His breathing slowed until he glanced at a spot near to him, when it instantly stilled.

Train had disappeared.

Winters squeezed his forehead, shook his head vigorously. No longer did he realize where he was or how he'd come to be there. He experienced sensations of danger, condemned himself for folly he could not explain.

Light reappeared.

This time it was he who was enveloped. In panic, he turned to flee.

Then he saw her. She stood before him, blocked

his retreat.

“Miss Neverland!” he whispered, his throat tight.

“Yes, Winters,” she replied calmly. “I am Collinda Neverland.”

She was as Myra had described her, small, slender, dreamlike in beauty. She did not have that smile which had caused great division of opinion. Rather, she looked sad and forlorn.

Winters tried to swallow. He said squeakily, “Sorry I spied on you like this. If you’ll let me by, I’ll be on my way.”

She remained unmoved, said in disappointment, “I had not expected you, Winters. Why did you come?”

He gulped and said something about duty. “I come to arrest a murderer.”

“You shouldn’t have bothered. Since you’ve troubled yourself, however, you may come with me.”

“W-where are we going?”

Her manner was surprisingly exultant then. “Jason Inbred has come back. He is even now searching for my jewels.”

“H-he’s my man,” said Winters. “W-where’s he looking?”

“He is in my dressing room. Come, I will show you.”

She moved round him and lighted his way down a long aisle, up a flight of steps and along a backstage corridor. Ahead of them, light spread from a side room.

**C**OLLINDA stopped, faced Winters again. “I have no relatives, Winters, nor any loved one. Nor have I, in my present abode, further need for rubies and diamonds. You are known to be generous, kind, and altogether deserving. What I have, therefore, I give to you. After tonight you will never see or hear me again. There are thirty panels in my room. Beginning at its door and

proceeding left, count them bottom up to seven, across to five, then down to three. Press three, then seven, then five, and you will have them. Now, if you are truly brave.”

She moved on. At her dressing room door she disappeared. Winters, scared stiff, stepped inside, his gun hand slapping frantically, but vainly, for his gun.

Inbred, thumping one panel after another along a wall, turned at a sound and saw him. On a dressing table a candle burned; its flame tossed a flickering light. Inbred stared for an instant, then went for his gun. But suddenly there was no light.

Winters clawed at his empty holster, thought that either he had gone mad or that he was in a dreadful nightmare. With inspiration conceived in deadly peril, he dropped flat on his face. Flame stabbed from Inbred’s gun until six shots had roared deafeningly.

Awe-inspiring silence followed. Winters stared into smoke-filled blackness.

If there were such things as miracles, he was sure he witnessed one then. Over by Inbred pale light appeared. Winters saw Inbred standing there, lips parted in terror. He turned slowly, eyes wide as if staring at approaching doom.

He screamed, “No! No!”

Winters saw what he supposed Inbred had seen—a shining dagger, pointed at Inbred’s heart. It drew away, poised for an instant, then in a curving sweep plunged itself home.

Inbred’s scream encompassed all that was imaginable respecting terror and pain. His collapse, slow at first, ended with a thud and a sigh. Even Winters, whose sympathy for erring mortals was slight, felt pity.

When Inbred had fallen, Winters felt a touch at his side. Warily he moved his right hand to discover what had touched him. He found his gun in its holster, there was no other touch, nor any other sound.