

If anyone had told Winters this story, he wouldn't have believed a word of it!

THE SALT WAGONS

A Lee Winters story

by Lon Williams

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters, overtaken by night in wild canyon country southwest of Forlorn Gap, stopped his horse to let him drink from a small, clear stream. It was time to turn homeward; Sanson Tigert—latest wanted monkey whose trail Winters had been following—had gotten away.

Winters was not sorry. Since his marriage to beautiful Myra Winters, he had thought much of giving up his dangerous trade and preempting some land. Fast gunslingers like Sanson Tigert were hostile to that dream; now when one eluded him, he regarded it possibly as an escape for pursuer, as well as for pursued.

While Cannon Ball drank leisurely, Winters surveyed his surroundings. Eastern faces of high mountains were already awash in full moonlight. An hour's wait, and he could ride home by illuminated trails—an advantage not to be considered lightly when a lone wayfarer faced such perils as grizzlies, cougars, badmen, and ghosts.

Especially ghosts. Here, Winters was confronted by an unattractive choice. He could ride on eastward in a canyon that opened upon spook-infested Alkali Flat, or he could turn northward in a second canyon which rose to that wide, misty valley called by early French trappers *Terre des Revenantes*, or *land of ghosts*.

Indecision ended in discovery of a patch of light some fifty yards eastward. Somebody had built a campfire; wind-drift brought odors of smoke, hot grease and steaming coffee.

Alert to possibility of danger, Winters pulled onto sandy ground and advanced with but little noise. Cannon Ball lifted his feet skittishly, his body aquiver from instinctive fear of some presence, invisible and mysterious.

But what they came upon was only one of those inexplicable creatures who spent whole lives in solitude. He was a small, bewhiskered prospector hunkered before a skillet in which sizzled slices of lean meat. He glanced up pleasurably. Cannon Ball had stopped and cast fearful glances hither and

yon—as if he saw nothing, yet knew something extraordinary was near.

“Howdy,” said Winters.

“Howdy yourself, Winters.”

“Huh?” Winters eyed him for a moment. “Can't place you, neighbor, though you do seem to know me.”

“My name is Tatum, Winters. Harrison Tatum, but better knowed as Unaka Tatum. Light and eat, Winters.”

Winters swung down. “It's considerable miles to Forlorn Gap; so, if you're willin', I'll have coffee with you.”

“Most willing,” said Tatum. “Meat, too. This is bear meat, but not old, tough bear. When you take one of these grizzlies just big enough to bring down a baby elk, he makes right good steaks.”

“Does smell good,” said Winters.

Tatum had fried a hoecake and had it cooling on a flat rock. He broke off a slab and knifed one of his steaks onto it. “There, Winters; it's a pleasure to have you for company. A man like me, doomed to spend eternity looking for gold and never finding any worth a sneeze, does get lonesome for sight of his own kind.” He poured coffee and handed it up. “Here, Winters; drink that, and you'll say you never drank anything like it before in your life.”

Warily Winters took Tatum's offerings. Tatum, though human in form, looked queer and insubstantial. Winters hesitated to eat, but yielded at last to hunger and thirst.

“Tastes all right,” he said. “And this coffee—umm! Best I ever had.” He ate and drank his hands and cup empty and wiped his mustache.

STRANGE developments occurred then. Coffee stimulations ran like tiny needles through his legs, arms, and up into his head. Exhilaration shook him. Lights flashed before his eyes. He stared around to see if mountains and canyons were as he had seen them before.

“Sort of knocks you, eh, Winters?” said Tatum.

“Yeah,” said Winters. He tightened his jaws and



Here was something totally different from anything that Winters had ever seen before . . .

stared with rising, angry suspicion at Tatum. "I'm thinking you've played a trick on me, Tatum." He turned to Cannon Ball and swung up. "I don't want no truck with fellers who play tricks."

Tatum lifted a quick hand. "Now, just a minute, Winters; before you ride off, I want to ask one favor."

"Yeah?"

Tatum gave him a humble, beseeching look. "Winters, you wouldn't happen to have a little salt in your pocket, would you?"

Winters was astonished. "Salt?"

Tatum nodded sharply. "Salt."

"Why, of course not, Tatum."

"You mean you don't carry salt in your

pocket?"

"Certainly not."

Tatum turned his head and spat. "If that don't beat anything I ever heard of."

"If I carried salt in my pocket, that would beat anything I ever heard of," Winters retorted angrily.

Tatum kicked at a small stone. "No salt! Next time I see Marshal Hugo Landers at Brazerville I'll report you, so help me. If it can be done, I'll have you fired."

"That," declared Winters warmly, "I'd regard as a favor."

Tatum pointed at his skillet where one small bear steak still sizzled in fuming grease. "Here I've been, living on unsalted bear meat, when anybody

ought to know that bear steaks without salt are just no steaks at all. And here you come along and eat my grub and drink my coffee, and you don't have no salt in your pocket. If ever there was an ingrate, Winters, you're it."

"If ever there was an unreasonable desert rat, Unaka Tatum, you're it. I only wish I had a barrel of brine to soak you in. Any man as unreasonable as you are, ought to have to eat nothin' but salt for a month."

Tatum gave his campfire and skillet a violent kick. "Winters, you're not welcome here another minute. Go north, east or west, but out of my sight; and don't ever come back, unless you've got salt in your pocket."

Tatum picked up a rock and flung it down. He strode wrathfully back and forth, spitting and grumbling.

Winters regarded him distastefully. "I'm sorry I ate your grub," he declared spitefully. "It wasn't fit for a dog to eat nohow. And don't worry about my coming back; if a big toad swallows you, that will be all right with me." He touched Cannon Ball's flanks and headed east.

"No salt!" Tatum growled after him. "Any man with no salt in his pocket ought to be shot."

Winters half-expected to be shot at, resolved that such would be a game two could play at, and turned back a watchful eye. But so long as he looked, Tatum did no more than tramp back and forth, pick up rocks and fling them down and swing an occasional kick at his campfire. In Winters' opinion Tatum was, indeed, a queer one.

TWO HOURS later, Winters turned his last canyon curve and emerged upon a vast, moonlit, whitish barren that stretched for many miles east, north and south. Alkali Flat! In sudden bewilderment, he pulled Cannon Ball to a halt.

He had never liked to cross Alkali Flat at night, for it was a haunted region then. But as its ghosts were late in coming out—usually appearing near midnight—he had thought to reach Alkali and cross it before its worst denizens were astir.

But here was something different from anything he'd ever seen or heard of in any sort of place. Before he'd had time to anticipate trouble, he had met and was almost alongside a huge wagon drawn by four horses. Behind it were other wagons—hundreds, possibly thousands of them. Their line stretched as far as he could see. Dust rose from

hoofs and wheels, spread itself before a southwest wind, and waved and fluttered northeastward as a gigantic sheet.

In each driver's seat rode a solitary man, lines and whip in hand, his face set with purpose and resolution. But suddenly their foremost teamster lifted his whip-hand and shouted, "Wo-ho-o!" His shout ran like an echo into remoteness as countless voices carried it on. Wagons stopped almost as one.

Their leader looked down at Lee. "Greetings, Winters."

"Huh?" exclaimed Winters, both puzzled and frightened. "I mean, howdy."

"I don't suppose you know me, Winters. But my name is Parmenter. More specifically, I am that Parmenter who comes from Thrace, which lies beyond Pontus. I am a salt merchant."

Winters swallowed and blinked his eyes. Parmenter's wagon was heaped with something white. "You mean all that load you have got there is salt?"

Parmenter twisted in his wagon seat and pointed back eastward. "It is apparent you know little about salt, Winters. *All* of my wagons are loaded with salt."

"Salt?"

"Yes, Winters, salt!"

Winters drew a hand across his forehead. "I didn't know there was that much salt on earth."

Parmenter regarded him without sympathy. "Fortunately, I can disclaim responsibility for your ignorance, Winters; but may I ask you a question anyhow?"

"Certainly," said Winters.

Parmenter, who looked large and tall, leaned slightly toward Winters. "Thank you, my obliging friend. Now my question. Do you know of anybody who would like to have some salt?"

Winters studied for a moment. He found it hard to think, because there were aspects of unreality about all this. But then he remembered something and chuckled softly.

"Sure," he said. "I know a man who'd like to have some salt."

"Fine!" exclaimed Parmenter. "Then you shall guide us to him."

Winters stiffened. "Now, that's a horse of another color. I didn't say I'd *take* you to a man who wants some salt."

"That is quite immaterial," said Parmenter. He put a trumpet to his lips and blew two high, quick

notes. Immediately a company of brightly-belted and plumed horsemen rode swiftly up. Parmenter addressed their leader. "Captain Argo, this man Winters entertains doubts as to whether he will guide us on our way; you will relieve him of such doubts."

At a nod from Captain Argo, Winters was promptly surrounded. Winters stared at Argo and his gallant riders. He remembered seeing in one of Myra's history books pictures of men like these—men in sandals, leg-guards, short skirts, belts, corselets of leather, helmets, and long helmet plumes of bright colors. This Captain Argo himself was a handsome one, long-legged, fair, athletic, and graceful, but hard and ruthless, if cold eyes and firm lips could be believed. "Lead on, Winters. You are a brave man, but you are not a foolish one."

WINTERS was never one to challenge great odds. He swung about and rode along with Argo. Once his orders were obeyed, Captain Argo was not a bad sort. He talked freely of his world and of himself. From his many evenings spent in listening to Myra read from her ancient-history books, Winters remembered some of those places mentioned by Argo—Lydia, Sparta, Hellepont, Macedonia, Athens, Thebes . . .

They rode briskly along, kept just ahead of Parmenter. Behind them rolled Parmenter's wagons. Rumbling wheels and their echoes kept up a continuous roar. At one moment Winters regarded this spectacle with detachment, wondered excitedly where these men might be going. Then he regarded himself as part of what he saw, and so drifted willingly with its tide. Supposedly he was their guide, but they appeared to pay no further attention to him. They moved as if driven by overwhelming urge, or drawn by irresistible destiny.

Great canyon walls rose about them, and as they swept on Winters experienced a terrific sensation of being lifted out of time and translated into an exciting and ageless past.

"You will hear more of me," Argo was saying. "Someday I shall be a great merchant myself, trading in all manner of things. My caravans and fleets will come to be known as argosies, and in histories yet to be written 'argosy' will come to be a word of import, a symbol of trade, adventure and riches."

"Sure," said Winters, feeling confidently omniscient, "I know all about that."

Argo leaned his horse closer and stared at Winters. "You do? Now, how could you know that?"

"Oh," said Winters, as if a voice not his own was speaking through him, "I know a thing or two."

Argo stiffened coldly. "It won't be wise of you to brag, Winters. In my country, one who brags is immediately challenged to prove what he claims." He lifted his horse into a lope. "There is no time for challenges now, however; watch out for yourself."

Abruptly they emerged from canyon country onto a mist-shrouded plain. Winters flung a look eastward and saw great cliffs rising against a high curtain of stars and a bright moon. He shuddered, for now he recognized this awesome place. It was *Terre des Revenantes*, land of ghosts.

He had to shift for himself, too, for Parmenter's wagons were sweeping past him, their long line moving like a great serpent, its forward end disappearing northward, then reappearing as it turned and swept southward to form a double line across *Terre des Revenantes*.

Parmenter drew his own wagon out of line and halted it. From timbers lashed to his wagon, he erected a small stand and mounted it. Drivers sprang down as their wagons moved into position, and each man drew a sword. Argo's horsemen stationed themselves near Parmenter and made themselves available as mobile guards.

WINTERS, curious, displeased at being left out of things, rode up to Captain Argo. "Would you mind explaining this, Captain?"

"Not at all," Argo replied courteously. "You should know, however. Did you not guide us here? Did you not inform Parmenter that you knew of somebody who wanted salt?"

Winters considered briefly. His recollection of Unaka Tatum and his hunger for salt had not encompassed anything like this. Yet discretion warned him against confessing that he'd involved himself in attempted comedy.

"Yeah," he said. "So I did; but he must've disappeared. In fact—" He caught himself. He'd started to say it wasn't here he'd seen his man who wanted salt, but that would have been a confession that he'd led them astray. Among these fierce traders and soldiers, a man had better be careful of

what he confessed.

“Quiet,” Parmenter shouted.

Silence moved like a wave across *Terre des Revenantes*.

Then Winters saw Parmenter put his trumpet to his lips again. He blew a blast this time that was loud and long, so loud that mountains shook and Winters fancied that people long dead would hear it and rise from their graves.

When echoes had at last ceased, new sounds arose, and out of that mist-covered land to westward a scattering of people appeared. Others came behind them, and in a short time there was a multitude that could be seen and halfway believed, but by no means counted.

Winters saw them at first hazily, then with increasing distinctness. Strangely, he was not scared; he was no longer a detached third party, but one of Parmenter’s host.

He heeled Cannon Ball close to Argo’s horse. “Captain, who are these people?”

“They are people who have come to buy salt,” said Argo. There was no sympathy in his voice. “They would rob us, if we were not armed. They will try tricks, too, so be on your guard.”

What Argo had meant by tricks soon became evident. Out of that spreading host strode young men of splendid physique, clad only in loin cloths. They spread down straw mattresses in a line parallel to Parmenter’s lines of wagons that reached farther than Winters could see. Tumbling, tableaux, and athletic contests were underway in no time.

Then, drawing even nearer, came pairs of men of huge proportions who threw down mats and began to wrestle.

“They make it look good,” Argo said aside to Winters, “but don’t let it fool you; take a look to your left.”

Winters looked. A quarter-mile to their left a band of men eased forward toward Parmenter’s wagons. “Thieves?” said Winters.

Argo nodded. “Thieves.”

“Salt thieves?”

“Salt thieves.”

“Why don’t they *buy*? Do they *have* to steal?”

“They don’t have to,” said Argo, tossing them a watchful eye. “Some are without money, it is true. But even those with money would steal if they could distract attention sufficiently.”

“How do they get salt, if they have no money?”

“They trade something for it.” Argo nodded to a

subordinate officer on a black horse. “Take your men left, Alcibiades.”

Alcibiades and about twenty men rode swiftly away. A little later Winters saw them driving a crowd of thieves before them, goading with their spears. A few thieves resisted and were thrust through.

“That’s one way to handle thieves,” said Winters.

Captain Argo caught what he thought was disapproval in Winters’ remark. “Perhaps you would handle them differently, sir?”

“I wouldn’t be here, if I’d had my way,” Winters replied dryly.

“You are here, nevertheless,” said Argo; “make sure you commit no diplomatic errors.”

WINTERS was surprised to find he understood what Argo meant. Since his marriage to Myra, he’d become an educated man. Myra? Why, what was he thinking? How could there be such a person as Myra, when events he now witnessed were centuries before her birth?

While his mind struggled with his confusion, athletes and wrestlers disappeared. Their ruse, if such it was, had failed. In their places appeared hundreds of beautiful women, dressed in mantles so sheer they amounted to little more than cobwebs. They immediately began to dance and to chant. Winters glanced right and left, then fixed his gaze straight before him. This was incredible.

Without turning his head, he said to Argo, “Captain, ain’t that immodest?”

“If that’s all you can say about it, Winters, there’s nothing to fear. It is meant to be enchanting; if my men fall for it, thieves will steal Parmenter ragged.”

Winters swallowed. “Well, Captain, it does make a man feel sort of enchanted, don’t it?” He spared one second for a glance at Argo.

Captain Argo had no more mind for dancing women than for dust under his horse’s hoofs. He was keeping watch for further attempts at thievery. His face was hard and stern. An explanation appeared when Winters glanced left again. At that section of their line left weak by withdrawal of Alcibiades and his men, a new group of thieves had assembled.

“Now you shall see some action, Winters. Come, if you wish.”

Captain Argo lashed his horse forward. Thieves

disentangled themselves from battling teamsters and fled, with Argo chopping them down. But even that effective captain used discretion, for when he saw men with bows and arrows rushing forward to meet him he turned back and regained his former position near Parmenter's stand. To their right other thieves had been repelled.

This diversion was a good thing for Winters. It broke his spell. Beautiful, dancing women lost their hold upon his fancy.

He turned slightly and surveyed his doubtful friend Argo. "You're quite a swordsman, Captain."

"You didn't accompany me, Winters." Argo spoke somewhat absently, for he was alert against further trouble. Now he was looking out into that mist-obsured plain, where a countless host had gathered. But he was not wholly forgetful of Winters. "You do not lack bravery, I trust?" he said, but still looked away.

"You can trust me not to mix in other people's fights," said Winters.

Argo ignored that. "Now, Winters, here is something that will, indeed, test your strength."

From that strange host opposite them came other women. These were even more beautiful than those who danced. Each carried a wineskin and a cup of gold.

"If they're bringing wine," said Winters, "they're welcome, for my part."

ARGO WAS watching his men. They had now formed in a long line of magnificent horsemen, plumes gently waving.

Argo said, possibly more to benefit himself than Winters, "Don't look at them, Winters; don't listen either. Plug your ears." He took his own advice by stuffing wads of wool into his ears, and by looking up and down his line.

Winters thought his behavior a lot of nonsense. He said, "I was never one to close my eyes against beauty."

Argo returned curtly, "These are Sirens, Winters. Men who yield to their enchantments are changed into swine. If you wish to become a pig, then look at them and partake of their wine."

Sirens! Winters thought of that with a shudder. Now that he understood, he was both intrigued and scared. He heard their distant singing, which drew nearer and nearer. Never had music been sweeter, never had it promised more. Winters trembled now; he searched his pockets frantically. He had a

bandana round his neck. He pulled it off, ripped pieces out of it and crammed them into his ears. And just in time, for a woman beautiful beyond a man's most luxurious dreams stood just below. Her eyes were upon Captain Argo, eyes that were filled with longing and promise.

Her lips said, "Wine, O handsome one?"

She poured wine into her golden cup and lifted it.

But Argo was looking away, at something far distant.

She came then to Winters, stood close to his right leg. Distantly he heard her voice, "O strange one, I would give you wine—wine so wonderful that you would never thirst again."

Winters stared at her. Though he could hear her voice but remotely, he heard ten thousand voices. They sang of gardens, of rippling streams, of lands of beauty, ease and endless pleasure. She held up her cup, and Winters reached down to take it.

"No!" Captain Argo shouted. He struck her cup with his sword, caused its wine to spill.

Winters stared at a spot near his horse's right front foot, where her wine had been swallowed by earth and sand. Out of that spot came a mist that twisted and spiraled up to his nostrils. Once more Argo intervened with violence; he snatched Winters' hat and thrust it over his face, so that Winters could neither see nor breathe.

His body convulsed. Transformation had laid its hold upon him; but a power beyond his comprehension cast it off. Released from his spell, his face uncovered, he saw an awesome, pitiable sight. Those lovely sirens had gone. Most of them had disappeared into that misty realm from which they had come.

But a few were still in sight. They, too, were moving away. But their progress was slower, for after each of them trotted a swine.

Winters sighed and glanced at Argo, who was removing wool from his ears. Winters uncorked his own ears. "Looks like I owe you something there, Captain."

Argo was more at ease now. "There are always a few weaklings, Winters. I choose my men well, and grateful am I that most of them have proved their worth. As you saw, a few failed and will never be men again."

WITH TRICKERY proved futile, business got underway. Customers formed hundreds of

lines and advanced briskly with salt containers.

But ahead of them galloped a young purple-clad man with something like a crown on his head. Accompanied by a mounted escort, he rode up to Parmenter's stand, dismounted and stepped up beside Parmenter.

"Who's he?" said Winters.

"He," said Argo, "is Prince Azzir-izzir. He is here to collect tribute for Great King Cyrus of Susa, King of Kings. It was of him I was thinking when I cautioned you against diplomatic errors. Look!"

Argo nodded toward those who had come to buy salt. They had all prostrated themselves in obeisance to Prince Azzir-izzir.

Winters was puzzled. He said sternly, "How come you do not likewise bow down, you and your men and Parmenter's teamsters?"

Argo lifted his chin haughtily. "We are Greeks, sir; we bow to no man, but only to our gods."

"Good for you," said Winters. "I've heard about you proud ancient Greeks."

"Ancient!" exclaimed Argo. "What could you mean by that?"

Winters squeezed his chin; now, just what could he have meant by that? "I'm afraid I let my tongue slip there," he said.

"Yes, I'm afraid you did," said Argo. "We Greeks do not regard ourselves as ancient." He gave Winters a puzzled look and turned away.

This was quite a show, thought Winters. Never had he seen so many people, nor so many different kinds of people, nor a sale of so much salt. A supply he had thought inexhaustible dwindled away until hundreds of wagons were empty.

Then there lingered stragglers who had bought no salt. They came forward reluctantly—men with their wives, or daughters. Those they exchanged for salt.

Winters blinked, finding this hard to believe. Then a man on a crutch stood below Parmenter's platform. He was about forty years of age, fairer than most, but sadder, too, than most. His left foot was gone; so was his right hand. Beside him stood a young woman of rare humility and physical charm.

This son of misfortune looked up beseechingly. "Sir, I have no money. But I must have salt for my wife and children."

Parmenter said coldly, "What have you to exchange for salt?"

There were seconds of hesitation and great

sadness. Then, "I have my daughter. You should not take her, though. She has a lover who would provide well for her, and she is my favorite child. Please, sir. You have great wealth, and I have so little." He glanced down. "This foot and this hand were cut off by order of Great King Cyrus, may he reign forever, so it is small work I can do anymore. Please, sir."

Prince Azzir-izzir had an appreciative and covetous eye. He said to this beggar's daughter, "What is your name, my beauty?"

She looked up fearfully. "I am Veeda. My unfortunate father's name is Unuk. What he has spoken is true; we are very poor."

Azzir-izzir nodded to Parmenter. "Take her. And when you have taken her, I shall demand her as a tax upon your princely profits; she shall be my slave."

"It is well," said Parmenter.

Winters had stared in unbelief and anger. He rode out and faced Parmenter. "Here," he said, and tossed a double-eagle into Parmenter's hands. "Take that for salt, and let this lady return home with her father."

Parmenter stared at this strange piece of gold. His eyes widened. "But this is more gold—" He stopped. "With this I could buy fifty maids more fair."

Prince Azzir-izzir was scowling darkly at Winters. "Who is this knave who would oppose my will?"

"I am Lee Winters, and I think you're a dirty scoundrel."

"Ah!" said Azzir-izzir. "What a pleasure this is going to be!"

Captain Argo snapped sharply, "Winters, I warned you; yet you have committed an unforgivable blunder. I shall have to surrender you to Prince Azzir-izzir, who no doubt will be pleased to torture you to death."

AZZIR-IZZIR unslung a magnificent bow from his shoulder and sprang down. He walked away fifty paces and took position, facing Winters. Horsemen who had attended him as bodyguard formed a semicircle at his back. "Dismount, knave," he said to Winters, "and I shall pierce your heart with an arrow. That, you will agree, is preferable to torture."

Winters swung down and stepped forward several feet from Argo. He heard a small cry of

fear, and when he turned to look, Veeda, daughter of Unuk, ran to him and put her arms around his neck. "O brave one, I have brought this evil upon you. Forgive me."

Winters removed her arms and pushed her gently away. "Don't worry about me, lady. Azzir-izzir ain't goin' nowhere."

She stared at him in amazement. "O one so brave, and all for me!" Quickly she removed a thin gold chain from about her neck and pressed it into his left hand. Attached to it was a small ruby. "If you escape, give this to someone you love, and she will always be beautiful."

"No," he said. He offered to give it back. "You don't owe me anything."

She refused to take it, but backed away and ran to her father.

"He has no weapon, O Prince," shouted Captain Argo. "Give him a bow and arrows."

"Arm mine enemy!" Azzir-izzir retorted scornfully. "Do not make me out a fool, Captain."

"Winters," said Argo, "you deserve to die, as you certainly will. Your death, however, will be unimportant. But if you should perchance draw royal blood, blame for it would be upon us Greeks. That would be critical, indeed; it would mean war between East and West."

"You should welcome that," said Winters. "That is a war you are going to win."

"Winters, in addition to being foolhardy, you are an upstart and a blasphemer," said Argo. "But face your enemy, for you are about to be killed."

Winters tensed his fingers above his six-gun and faced Azzir-izzir. His adversary smiled coldly and cruelly fixed an arrow to his bowstring. Then, with lightning swiftness, he lifted, drew and let fly. But Winters had stepped right and brought up his gun. It flamed and thundered, and Azzir-izzir tensed, looked surprised, and crumpled forward onto his face.

Cries of consternation rose. Guards of their royal master spurred toward Winters, spears lowered to impale him. Then other cries rose, and Captain Argo and his men intervened and cut them down.

Parmenter raised his trumpet and blew retreat. Within seconds his wagons were rolling away. They gained speed rapidly, and there were clouds of dust and roaring thunders of hoofs and wheels.

Argo's cavalry lined up to follow as a rear guard. Captain Argo pulled alongside as Winters

remounted. He raised his hand in salute. "Sir, you speak with thunder from Zeus. This event will become a legend and a brave example for us Greeks to follow. But we must now depart, for when it is spread abroad that a royal prince has been slain, a mighty army will pursue us. Farewell."

"So long, Captain, and good luck."

Winters watched them ride away, their plumes rising and falling in colored magnificence. He thought, *What glorious history awaits them!*

IN FORLORN GAP, a few windows still glowed with lamplight. Many houses had no windows, but only gaping squares where windows had been. There was one spot, however, where lights in this semi-ghost-town burned brightly. Winters headed for that light.

In Doc Bogannon's saloon, only drinking place left in town, its big handsome owner announced to late-comers, "Sorry, friends, but it's midnight; time to close."

Lingering customers got up and left. Bogannon put away his last glass and had reached up to extinguish his bar lamp, when his batwings swung in.

"Winters!"

Winters, looking pale and moving unsteadily, strode up and planked down a coin.

"Wine, Doc."

Bogannon stared at him. "Winters, you're as pale as a bed sheet. Now I know you've seen a ghost."

"Doc," said Winters, "you don't know nothin'. I ain't seen no ghost, and I hope I never do see one."

"Have a chair, Winters, and we'll take our nightcaps together. You look like you're about to fall apart."

Winters went to a table and was joined at once by Bogannon. Bogie poured two glasses of wine and sat opposite Winters.

Winters drank slowly, put down his glass and backhanded his mustache. He opened his left hand then, and let something fall. It lay between his glass and Bogie's, a slender chain that shone like fire and a ruby as startlingly red as freshly-spilled blood.

"How do you like that, Doc?"

Bogie picked it up, but instantly he dropped it. "Winters!" he exclaimed. "It gave me a shock."

Winters picked it up and held it affectionately. "It's got magic in it, Doc. Whoever wears that will

always be beautiful.”

Doc stared at him. “You sound peculiar, Winters; you must’ve had an experience. Where did you get that thing, anyhow?”

Winters emptied his glass and held it for a refill. “Doc,” he said slowly, half-dreamily, “you

wouldn’t believe me if I told you. I scarce believe it myself. And wouldn’t—but there it is.”

