

**Lee Winters Story**

# THE KITE FLIER

by Lon Williams

**Swindlers ought to be shot, Winters thought. But, at least, he could capture this one, and put him in jail where he belonged. And if the snake resisted . . .**



Lee Winters was ever cautious, and easily alarmed.

**D**EPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters, homeward bound from badman's hideout country near Hoodoo, had just reached a dreary, forbidding spot where his southward trail ran into Elkhorn Road. This lonesome junction was eight or nine miles west of Forlorn Gap, that semi-ghost town where he lived and maintained his official post of duty. Here was a region of precipice and cliff. For three or four miles westward, Elkhorn Road was flanked on its northern side by great curving walls of granite; on its southern side, by a narrow, deep gorge. In this gorge, and at this season of chinook winds and melting snows, raced Big Banshee Creek, turbulent and wild, its voice a symphony of hiss and thunder.

Lee's horse, Cannon Ball, as he often did when he encountered mystery or danger, reared and half-turned to retrace his steps. Winters had barely brought him under control when a man, hunched nearby, screeched angrily, "Git out of my light. When I'm tryin' to see something, why do you git in my light?"

Winters observed him against a ledge off to his left, a fuzzy-faced character of small stature in turned-up hat, scarred boots and dirty jeans. His blue eyes glared with fierce hostility. Though the man's name was Antony Bean, Winters thought of this quarrelsome prospector by his more familiar

cognomen of Coffee Bean. To Lee, Bean was unique in that he had neither friends nor enemies. Whether he desired enemies was unknown. It was a certainty, however, that he wanted no friends.

"Well!" exclaimed Winters. "If I'm in your light, why don't you tell me what you're looking at, so's I can get out of your light?"

Bean shook a small, rusty fist at Winters. "Now, see here, Winters, since you're in my light, why don't you move without having to know what I'm looking at?"

"Might have to do too much moving," said Winters stubbornly.

"If you want my opinion," stormed Bean, "you can start moving and keep on moving till doomsday. You're in my light anywhere I can see you. No matter where you're at, there's always something behind you I'd rather look at than you."

"Coffee Bean," Winters retorted hotly, "you're downright insulting. I'd sic my dog on you, if I had a dog."

"Winters, that's neither here nor there," snapped Bean. "Just get out of my light, that's all I ask."

"You just tell me what you want to see, and I'll get out of your light, but not before."

Bean put his fists on his hips. "Winters, you're as cantankerous as a cornered hog. Why don't you look and see what it is I want to see? You've got

eyes, ain't you?"

Winters considered that halfway reasonable. Accordingly he turned in his saddle and looked westward, supposing Bean's object of curiosity to be in that direction. It was. What Winters saw was a kite. It was swinging back and forth at a considerable height, its tail writhing, its long, sagging string almost in direct line with a mountain notch known as Windy Pass.

"Why, it's a kite," Winters commented with enthusiasm.

"A kite?"

"Yeah, a kite."

"Winters, are you sure you know what a kite is?"

"Of course I know. Flew many a one when I was a small potato in Trinity Valley, down in Texas. All sizes, too. When there wasn't anything else handy, I used a barn door, one of them big-size doors. Tied a yearling calf to it for a tail and a quarter-mile of half-inch rope for a kite string."

**B**EAN SPAT disgustedly. "Winters, do you expect me to believe that mangy yarn?"

"I don't expect you to do anything polite, but it's so," declared Winters. "Took a hard wind to raise a kite like that, but we had some hard winds in Texas. One time I was flying one of them barn-door kites when a wind lifted it so high and fast it carried me clear into East Texas."

Bean spat again and sat down. "I give up Winters. You can go on home; you ain't no help nohow."

Winters shifted to a leg-across position and watched Bean's discovery with curious interest. "Ever see that kite before, Coffee?"

"I certainly have," Bean replied shortly.

"Ever go up there to see who's flying it?"

"Certainly not. I'm not one to go poking my nose in other people's business. That's a deputy marshal's job. What's more, there's supposed to be gold in these hills. Anybody'd give up looking for gold and spend his time flying a kite must be daffy. I never cared for daffy people."

That last remark struck a responsive note in Lee's own thinking. "Me neither," he said and gave his horse a nudge. "Good day, Bean."

That evening, after supper, he sat at home with his beautiful young wife, Myra Winters. Before a fire in their living room she read to him from one of her many books of literature, mythology and

history. This time she was reading about a Roman emperor who expressed regret that Romans hadn't but one neck so he could chop off all of their heads at one whack.

"Excuse my interrupting," said Lee. He was beginning to chill from an overwrought imagination. "Just wanted to ask one question. How do you figure people like that?"

Myra lowered her book. "Really, I hadn't bothered to figure them," she replied thoughtfully. "But since you mention it, how do you figure a horse?"

"You don't figure a horse. He's just that way—like a horse, I mean. But a man who likes to cut off people's heads, well, he ain't quite a man. You've got to figure him by some other rule."

"Yes, I suppose—"

Myra's remark was not finished. A knock on their front door caused Lee to jump out of his chair. "For a second there," he said, "I was certain that was somebody with a axe." Scared near spitless, he buckled on his six-gun and went to see who was trying to get in. Their caller proved to be only one of their neighbors, Mrs. Matilda Melpin, mother of three small children and wife of Edgy Melpin, a prosperous gold-panner. "Good evening," said Winters. "Come in, Tildy."

Mrs. Melpin was in tears. Myra took her in her arms and led her to a chair. "Matilda, what on earth?"

Matilda shook her head sadly. "I don't know what's wrong, but I think my husband is losing his mind."

"Of course not," Myra said consolingly. "He's probably had some trouble, but nothing serious, surely."

Without making sense at all, Winters said, "He ain't took to kite-flying, has he?"

Myra and Tildy stared at him.

"Lee!" Myra scolded. "Let's don't be facetious."

"Well, I was just asking."

**T**ILDY SAID unhappily, "I wish it was only that, but it's not. It's his money, what we've been saving to buy a farm back East. He says he's going to invest it and make a fortune."

"Humph!" Winters grunted. "That is serious. What's he aiming to invest it in?"

"A mineral rod," said Tildy. "You've heard of such things. When I was a girl in Missouri, a man

came to our farm and tried to sell one to my father. Said he could find gold with it. To prove it, he had my father hide a five-dollar gold piece in a bunch of grass. He then pretended to find it with his mineral rod. My brother caught on how it was done. This stranger's confederate used a mirror to spot for him. Except for my brother's good sense, my father would've swapped his farm for something completely worthless."

"What's this feller's name?" asked Winters.

"You mean this swindler my husband wants to deal with?"

"Yes."

"Well, Edgefield wouldn't tell me. He's afraid I might queer things." Tildy got up. "Lee, I want you to talk to him."

"You mean to Edgy?"

"Yes."

"All right, where's he at?"

Tildy's face was pale and tragic. "That I don't know. Maybe at Bogannon's saloon. There's one thing I'm still thankful for, he hasn't yet taken his money with him."

Myra put an arm about Tildy as she was leaving. "Don't worry, Matilda. I'm sure Lee will do everything he can to stop this swindle." When Tildy had departed, Myra came back to her husband. "You will, won't you, Lee?"

Winters did not share his wife's enthusiasm, nor her charitable impulse. "Edgefield Melpin is a grown man," he told her grouchily. "I'm not his bodyguard, and I'm not his guardeen."

"Of course, Lee," returned Myra, hiding her own craftiness. "If Edgy wants to reduce his good wife to poverty, and let his little children go hungry, that's his business, not ours. Come, sit down, and let me read some more about that dear old emperor who liked to cut off people's heads."

Winters tightened his gun belt and went for his hat. "It's a heap of help you are," he said grumpily.

As he went out to get his horse, Myra called sweetly, "I'll wait up for you, Lee."

He was nobody's guardian certainly, yet as Winters rode toward Doc Bogannon's saloon he was in a bad mood. Swindlers and cheats were like predatory animals; they deserved to be shot. Unless somebody protected innocent, trusting souls like Edgy Melpin, such souls would be lucky to get off with their lives. Of course he couldn't walk right up and shoot this swindler on general principles, as ought to be done, but if the snake turned out to be a

wanted monkey, then Winters could lock him up—shoot him, too, if it took that to get him out of circulation.

ONLY A few houses showed lighted windows at night in Forlorn Gap. Others were unoccupied and ghostly. Bogannon's saloon, as usual, was otherwise. It was one lively spot, where citizens and strangers gathered for a little cheer after a hard day of digging or traveling. By now, those who drank whiskey had attained their characteristic conditions of belligerency or over-friendliness, depending on their natures. Bogie had reached a moment of leisure where, except for a stranger who wished to be philosophical, he could have relaxed and watched his patrons as an interested observer.

This character who disturbed his rest was slightly above medium height and had that lithe, graceful, deceptively quick strength of a panther. He leaned against Bogie's bar and purred softly, "My name is Jabalay—Dr. Zirk Jabalay. Or had I told you that already Bogannon?"

"Three times," Bogie answered wearily. "I believe you mentioned, also, that you were once a circus performer."

Jabalay's smooth, handsome face showed delight. "Ah, you did remember, didn't you? Yes, I was an aerialist, more specifically a trapeze artist. Quite a famous one, indeed, in both Europe and America. Wherever circuses were known, there also was known Zirk Jabalay."

"I'm puzzled that you gave it up," said Bogie. Doc himself looked distinguished. He was tall, broad, with a fine dark head and intelligent face.

"I'm equally puzzled about you," said Jabalay. "By your appearance, I should judge you to be a statesman, qualified for some post requiring great ability. Yet I find you in an empty town like this, making your living as a mere barkeep."

"Let us regard our curiosity in that particular as mutually exclusive," Bogie proposed casually. "Our thoughts may well revert to more generally important concerns, such as wondering why man was created at all. By reason of what destiny we have journeyed to Forlorn Gap is a matter that could be of too intimately personal concern for public discussion. Such could be true, also, as to missions upon which we severally may have presently embarked."

"You speak as a true philosopher," observed

Jabalay, with a strange, admiring look in his intense blue eyes. "Which reminds me that I have my own philosophy. It relates to human capacity. I do not refer to collective but to individual capacity. It is my theory that few men exercise their full powers, either in physical or in mental endeavor. Driven by fear or confronted by grim necessity any man, I believe, may become many times his normal self and exhibit incredible strength and endurance."

A grunt caused Bogie to shift his attention. A second character had eased into their company. "Is that so?" he sneered. This one, obviously a tough and effective ruffian in normal circumstances, had taken on enough whiskey to bring out his worst qualities, particularly his belligerency. He was physically undersized, yet in his opinion patently not at all handicapped by that circumstance. "Speaking of strength," he said, his mouth drawn down at one side, "there's such a thing as weakness, too." He patted his six-gun. "Strength don't mean nothin' when you're up against this."

"Ah," Bogie said with secret uneasiness, "so we have another viewpoint? Right interesting."

"Are you trying to insult me, mister. If you are—"

Jabalay placed a hand firmly on this third party's shoulder. "Glad to have you join our company. Bogannon, a drink for my friend." When Bogie had filled a glass, Jabalay put down a coin.

His generosity was instantly scorned. "Take your money back, mister. Don't nobody have to buy drinks for Pritchard Mocksin."

"Mocksin?" said Jabalay. "A fine name. I am Dr. Zirk Jabalay, or did I mention that already?"

"Yeah," snarled Mocksin, "you been mentioning it all evening." Mocksin brought out an imposing roll of money, peeled off a bill and flung it down in front of Bogie. "There, mister. Any time I want a drink, I got what it takes." When Bogie put down his change, Mocksin pocketed it and downed his whiskey. "As I was telling you," he said drunkenly, "put a gun against a man's stomach and he gets as weak as water." He lifted his six-gun and showed Bogie and Jabalay its notches. "That's how many I've killed. Some of 'em got down on their knees and begged, like blubberin' women." He reholstered his gun, but sneered at Bogie. "Suppose I told you I aimed to shoot you. Think you'd feel as strong as two men?"

**B**OGIE DIDN'T answer. His batwings swung in and a slim, weather-beaten newcomer with a badly used hat and dark mustache strode in.

"Winters!" Bogie exclaimed. "Come in, Winters." As Lee strode up, he added, "Am I glad to see you!"

Winters eased down a coin. "A nip of wine, Doc." When Bogie had set up a glass, Winters lifted it and sipped its contents. His dark eyes rested meanwhile upon Jabalay and Mocksin. "Name your new friends, Doc."

"My apology, Winters!" exclaimed Bogie. He nodded at Zirk Jabalay. "This, Winters, is my esteemed and learned philosophical friend, Dr. Zirk Jabalay. Dr. Jabalay, Deputy Marshal Lee Winters." He nodded with less enthusiasm at Pritchard Mocksin. "And this recent acquaintance is none other than Pritchard Mocksin himself. If I may say so, these two are as unlike as two rabbits and a fox. While Dr. Jabalay, a true philosopher, believes that man seldom reaches his capacity in exercise of strength and endurance, Mocksin here has a theory that man always poses as being superior to what in fact he is. There is a further distinction between them. Mocksin, according to notches on his pistol, has proved his theory, while Dr. Jabalay, learned and persuasive though he is, has left his theory unsupported by actual proof."

"You mean," said Jabalay smoothly, "that I, possibly, am less vocal respecting my attainments. Not that I would disparage my friend's accomplishments." Jabalay put an arm about Mocksin's shoulders. "Indeed, I regard him as a mighty warrior, entitled to a warrior's praise, as well as to my humble acclaim and tribute." He eased down another coin. "Bogannon, whiskey for my friend."

Bogie complied reluctantly. "Dr. Jabalay, I must admit that your friend handles his whiskey well. I fear, however, that he is about to become drunk, unless you have aroused in him that hidden reserve of strength and manly endurance you so eloquently proclaim as man's universal endowment."

Mocksin picked up his drink and swallowed it with an air of defiance. He then indicated Jabalay with his thumb. "Heesh my friend."

"Exactly," said Jabalay. "If Mocksin here can't take care of himself, he can count on me." He turned to conduct Mocksin away.

Winters lifted a hand. "One moment, Jabby."

"Yes?" Jabalay responded coldly.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a mineral rod you’d like to sell an interest in, would you?”

Jabalay’s countenance assumed strange, enigmatic depth and menace. This indicated to Winters that Jabalay was not a mere cuckoo, but one of those occasional insane geniuses who drifted into Forlorn Gap with sinister and often deadly motives.

“Winters,” Jabalay said with cold resentment, “a seller should know his market. Whatever I have to sell, you may expect me to proceed on that principle. Goodnight, sir.”

Winters watched them leave, puzzled, suspicious, but not sure whether this Jabalay was Tildy Melpin’s reported swindler or whether he was a swindler at all. He turned to Bogie. “Doc, know anything about your friend Jabalay?”

Bogie shook his head. “Nothing, Winters, except that he is capable of contradictory behaviors. When you observe him closely, you can see yourself as a corpse reflected in his peculiar eyes. Yet when he wishes to give them exhibition, he is capable of most ingratiating manners.” Somebody yelled for whiskey and Bogie added hurriedly, “Excuse me, Winters. A market develops for what I have to sell.”

While Bogie waited on his guests, Winters strolled among them in search of anyone who might have borne earmarks of conniving and thievery. He saw gold-diggers who should have been at home with their families, drifters who were at home nowhere and anywhere, traveling men who wore fraternal rings, sparkling shirt studs, gray hairs, and wrinkles of hard-working respectability. In his opinion, Bogie’s guests included plenty of tough characters but none sufficiently clever and unscrupulous to qualify as a mineral-rod swindler. His thoughts returned to Jabalay. There was his man.

**B**UT JABALAY was elsewhere. A westbound stage had stopped at Goodlett Hotel. Fresh horses had been hooked on and it was about to depart when a lithe, well-dressed character with a drunk in tow called up, “Driver, have you got room for two more?”

“This stage is not interested in hauling liquor slob.”

“I promise, sir, that he will cause no trouble.”

“Where you bound?”

“Ah, sir, for my friend’s ranch just off Elkhorn

Road, eight miles west of here, more or less.”

“Your fares then.”

“Yes, indeed.” Jabalay handed up a gold coin. “And may I add, sir, that you’re a gentleman with a heart as pure as that gold.”

Jabalay helped his intoxicated companion in, where they scrounged into a seat.

Eight miles, more or less, from Forlorn Gap, Jabalay poked his head out and yelled, “Driver, what place is this?”

Stage and horses had slowed because of dangers of cliff and precipice. “We’re just now entering Windy Pass.”

“Then by all means stop. Our destination was Hoodoo Road. You will have to turn around, I fear.”

“Whoa! What do you mean, turn around? Man, a desert rat and his donkey couldn’t turn around on this road, much less could a stage and four horses. It’s no more’n a quarter-mile back to Hoodoo Road anyhow. You can get out and walk.”

A man who rode gun guard leaned over and spat. “And no funny business, mister.”

“I yield to necessity,” Jabalay commented without resentment. “Come, my friend.” He stepped out and was followed by Mocksin, who had to be supported. Jabalay waved his free hand. “Stage door is closed; a pleasant journey to you all.”

When they were alone, Mocksin held out a hand. “I want a drink.”

“Of course,” said Jabalay without offering any. “Come with me.”

Bright moonlight poured it upon them from above mountain peaks. Where they had alighted, Elkhorn Road in its westward course had just begun a sharp turn into Windy Pass. Behind them its direction was straight north. At another sharp curve, its direction was east and west. Where Jabalay and Mocksin stood, a promontory of great rocks extended between them and Banshee Gorge.

It was through a winding corridor of this promontory that Jabalay conducted his intoxicated companion. They emerged upon an open space, at their feet a precipitous drop of over two hundred feet. Below them Big Banshee’s fierce waters plunged and roared.

Mocksin shrank back in terror. “Looks scary,” he said. Though fright had begun to sober him, that result was too late. Jabalay slipped a loop of rope over his head and arms and jerked it tight. As a

precaution, he slipped Mocksin's six-gun from its holster. While surprise still worked for him, he dropped another loop, this one to Mocksin's legs near his ankles. Mocksin screamed in angry fright. "Here! What are you doing? Get these ropes off me."

"Steady now," purred Jabalay as he also appropriated Mocksin's money and other valuables. "If you should fall, you might tumble over that awful precipice." While he talked, he made his ropes secure, so that Mocksin could move neither arms nor legs with any helpful effect. That finished, Jabalay stood erect, held Mocksin to prevent his falling.

**M**OCKSIN sobered fast. "I'll kill you for this, Jabalay. You said you had found gold out there. Said you had a mineral rod. Said you'd sell me part interest in it. You're nothing but a lying, dirty scoundrel. You—"

Jabalay gave him a slight push. Threat of yawning death choked Mocksin's voice.

"You've nothing to fear, my good friend," said Jabalay. "I merely brought you here in further support of my theory, namely, that under sufficient stress, a man can do that which ordinarily would seem superhuman." He reached up and called attention to a pulley that had been fastened to a boulder and through which ran a stout rope. That same rope ran in two strands across Banshee Gorge and by long observation could be seen as ending at a pine tree.

"What's that for?" gasped Mocksin.

Jabalay took hold of a short strap attached to one strand of rope and drew it down. "Fastened to this," he explained, "is a stout pad of leather, made to fit a man's mouth. By taking it in your mouth and clamping down on it with your teeth, you have a means of supporting yourself. Here, try it."

Mocksin flung his head aside. "I'll do no such thing. Get these ropes off me. I've seen all I want to see of you."

Jabalay continued reminiscently, "I was once a circus performer, and aerialist, or trapeze performer. I could take such a pad as this in my teeth and swing high, swing low. Not only could I support my own weight, but mine and that of two other performers who hung onto my hands. It was rather trying, I admit, but when a man is swinging at great height, peril gives him added strength."

"W-what are you driving at?" stammered

Mocksin.

"You must have caught on by now, Mocksin. I'm going to send you across this chasm. If you refuse to cooperate, I shall simply shove you and let you fall to your death. Here is your chance. So long as you hold this in your teeth, you shall live. Otherwise, you will die."

"Jabalay, I'll live to kill you for this. I'll—"

Jabalay tilted him toward Banshee Gorge. As he did so, he presented Mocksin with his grim alternatives. Mocksin chose to grab with his teeth. Jabalay removed his supporting hand and Mocksin swung out into space, only his teeth supporting his weight. As rope was fed into that perilous space, Jabalay purred contentedly, "You have your theory, Mocksin, and I have mine. It is your theory that man is an imposter, boasting of strength he does not possess. It is my theory that man is far greater than he realizes. But we shall see."

Slowly but steadily Mocksin moved on, his supporting rope sagging more and more with his outward progress. But then, when he was directly over Banshee's leaping torrent, his rope stopped. There, his teeth biting desperately into leather, he hung on, tossed as a grotesque pendulum by driving winds.

Jabalay was not concerned with Mocksin's probable thoughts, but with his endurance. As he watched and waited, his right hand by slow movement, counted time. He continued to sixty seconds then began again. When he had counted to five minutes, he exclaimed, "Amazing! I was never that good myself."

But then it ended. Mocksin announced its finish by a terrified scream as he dropped into swift, foaming Banshee.

**N**EXT DAY, as he was about to leave town for further search for a wanted monkey in Hoodoo country, Lee Winters met Edgy Melpin, who strolled along in a daydream. Lee pulled Cannon Ball to a restless stop.

"Morning, Edgefield," he said with studied friendliness.

Melpin was clean-shaved, fair, and somewhat frail for a man of his calling. He stopped and glanced up, a faraway look in his eyes. "Morning, Winters."

"I hear you're about to make a right important investment, Edgefield."

"Does that concern you, Winters?"

“Yes. I’m against important investments, especially with swindlers.”

“Are you calling me a swindler?”

“I’m advising you not to deal with swindlers.”

“Did I ask for your advice?”

“You got it without asking,” Winters replied sharply. “Don’t be a fool, Melpin.”

He gave Cannon Ball a nudge and was gone before Melpin had time for further questions.

About mid-afternoon he was returning to Forlorn Gap, when he met Gee-haw Lanseer’s four-horse stagecoach pounding westward on Elkhorn Road.

Gee-haw yelled, “Howdy, Winters. Gid-dap, you lazy, snortin’ plugs. Yaaa-ow!”

Winters had pulled aside and stopped. He paid no attention to Gee-haw, for something else had caught his eye. Among Lanseer’s seven or eight passengers were two he recognized. They were Zirk Jabalay and Edgefield Melpin.

This recognition caused him to grunt in contempt. Edgy was like any other sucker, willing to accept advice only when it would be of no use. Winters continued his homeward ride. He had a feeling of self-satisfaction because he had offered to be of help and had his proffered services scorned. If Edgy got skinned alive, well and good; he deserved it.

But then Lee thought of Myra and of what her opinion of him would be, if she learned of his present attitude. He thought, also, of Tildy and her children. Conscience immediately began to hurt him.

“Whoa!” he yelled. He saw Cannon Ball to a halt and headed him back toward Elkhorn Pass. Beconfound if Edgy was a wild-eyed idiot.

With sufficient urging, Cannon Ball made tracks. Gee-haw’s stage was miles ahead, but Cannon Ball was both long-legged and long-winded. He’d catch up.

At Hoodoo Road, Winters reined down sharply. Across a bend in Banshee Gorge he saw again what he had seen less than twenty-four hours before, namely, a kite. It rode high above intervening pines, what appeared to be its two-strand string sagging westward toward Windy Pass. Mystified and scared by this unexplained situation, he kneed Cannon Ball gently and eased forward.

Elkhorn Road curved northward here, then swung westward and a few hundred yards farther curved abruptly southward. Where it again curved,

this time sharply westward into Windy Pass, Winters saw where those kite strings had their anchorage. It was behind a mass of rocks where they grouped as a promontory within a curve of Banshee Gorge.

WINTERS LEFT his horse in a cliff-bound cove and hurried forward on foot. Mystery increased when he saw a man beyond Banshee Gorge. As those kite strings slacked rapidly, kite and tail drifted downward into this stranger’s hands. He went to work immediately, results being that one kite string was removed and run through a pulley tied to a larger string and then reunited with its former companion. Then began a movement of both kite and larger string back across Banshee.

To Winters this meant that two men were at work, one on each side of Banshee Gorge, that by using pulleys and larger and larger strings they were setting up a cableway. But why?

He moved forward cautiously to find his answer.

What he discovered caused him to gasp. Zirk Jabalay was there, hurriedly drawing a rope of hemp through a pulley, whose hook had been imbedded in stone. His kite and its strings had been removed and laid aside. Soon a two-stranded cableway reached across, no less than four hundred feet from end to end.

At Jabalay’s feet lay Edgefield Melpin, his legs tightly bound with a spiraling rope, his hands likewise bound behind his back. Winters stared, reduced to inactivity by hypnotic fear and enchantment. What he observed had nothing to do with selling a mineral rod. It had nothing to do with anything he’d ever before seen.

With ropes secured and tested, Jabalay bent and lifted Melpin to his feet. He then reached up and took hold of a strap which had a small leathery looking object fastened to its lower end. Whatever struggle of muscle and words they’d had was over. Here was beginning a new phase of Melpin’s experience.

“I doubt if you’ve ever traveled like this before,” said Jabalay, his manner cold. “Now that I have your money, you’d think my interest in you would be at an end. But it isn’t. I am, above all over things, a philosopher, a believer in what might be called those supernatural powers of which man himself is capable. Accordingly, I shall put you to an experiment.”

“Let me go, Jabalay,” Melpin begged. “I’ve got a wife and children. You’ve got my money; why ain’t that enough?”

“Because it isn’t enough. Genius is never satisfied with money alone. I’m interested to know your capabilities, even to their fullest measure. In our brief struggle just now, you allowed me to overcome you easily. Had you used all of your powers, a different result would have been certain. Now, do you see this pad of leather? You are to take it in your mouth and hold onto it. Why? Because you are going on a journey across this chasm. Like a trapeze performer, you are going to hang on by your teeth.”

“You beast!” seethed Melpin. “You can’t get away with this. You’ll be caught and hung.”

“Others have foretold even worse,” said Jabalay. “Events belied their prophecies. Are you ready?” He lifted Melpin and stood him where he could see down into Banshee Gorge. He then leaned him precariously.

“No!” Melpin screamed.

Jabalay offered him his choice—his leather mouthpiece or his sudden plunge to death. As Jabalay leaned him farther, Melpin took his mouthpiece in frantic eagerness. Instantly he was swung into space, unable to cry out against his predicament, which every moment carried him farther from hope.

Winters was horrified. Worse, he was paralyzed by a feeling that this was a nightmare whose frightful aspects would vanish when he awoke. But

he did not awake. Melpin moved on until he hung over Banshee’s furious, noisy current; there his movement stopped. At that moment Jabalay’s right hand began to move up and down as if counting seconds.

Suddenly Winters shook his head, gulped and sprang down from his perch. “Stop it,” he yelled. His six-gun was in his hand. It roared as Jabalay whirled to face him, his own hand sweeping toward an underarm holster. Jabalay tensed, walked staggeringly back and forth, then dropped back in a dead heap.

Winters turned to face his enemy beyond Banshee, Jabalay’s confederate who had already sent a bullet in Lee’s direction. It was a long shot, but Winters took careful aim and his bullet went true.

He holstered his gun and sleeved his face. For a moment he stared at Edgy Melpin, who swung in space, rocked by winds from Windy Pass. Then he awoke to Melpin’s danger.

“Hold tight, Edgy,” he yelled. “I’m bringing you in.”

Winters worked frantically and within a few seconds Edgy was heaved ashore, where he sank in a faint at Lee’s feet.

Lee himself sat down. He hoped Edgy would come out of it. Of that he couldn’t be sure. But there was one thing he figured as a certainty; Myra Winters was soon going to have a gray-haired husband.