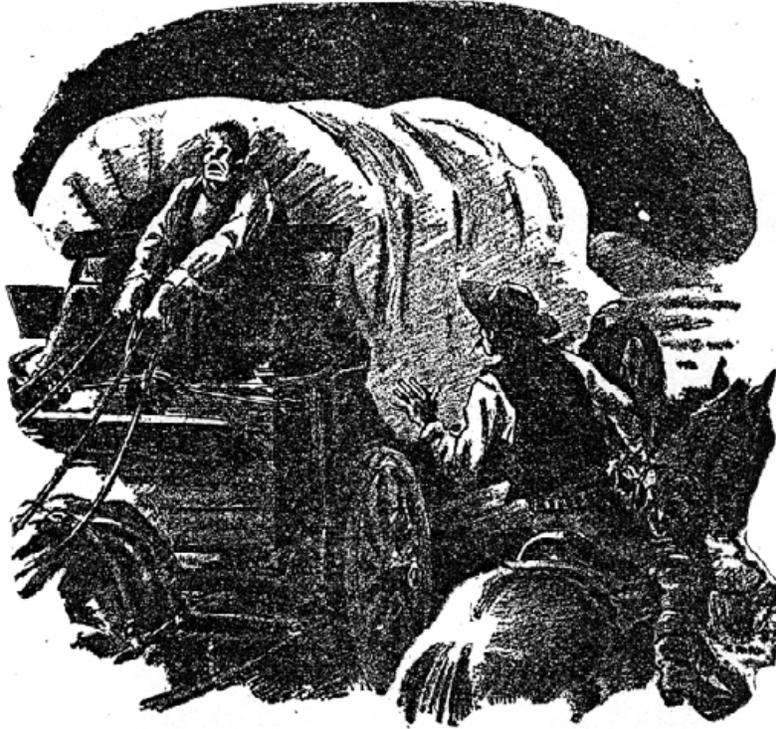


**It is too bad that Deputy Marshal Lee Winters didn't live in modern times. For, if he had been so fortunate, he would have had more than Cannon Ball at his disposal for a quick ride over eerie, spooky Alkali Flats.**



## *PHANTOM CARGO*

A "Lee Winters" Story  
by Lon Williams

**D** EPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters, caught at sundown ten miles northeast of Cow Creek, decided upon a shortcut for home across Alkali Flat. His big horse, Cannon Ball, sensed his master's purpose and swung through shadow-dappled canyons at a spirited gait until, by ten o'clock, his hoofs were thudding dully upon that wide expanse of desolation which spread northeastward to Forlorn Gap. Winters exercised no restraining hand, for a winter wind moaned through canyons and out across Alkali Flat's dreary waste, its bone-chilling intensity by contrast lending enchantment to thoughts of home, wife

and fireside.

But this was a ghostland, as well as a wasteland. Winters contemplated its crossing with dread, for many strange things happened there at night. Mysterious and ghostly objects moved there, too. Men of sober habits had seen wagon trains moving silently across it by starlight; men with only mild-alcoholic tendencies reported having seen hordes of buffalo-headed men marching there, coming in endless procession out of moonlit haze and moving on to lose themselves in haze again. Winters himself had heard unearthly sounds in its ceaseless winds—lone, disconsolate wolf howls; distressful

cries of human; plaintive, ringing calls of owls; inexplicable songs of unknown origin; lonely whispers and moans related to nothing in his knowledge of kindred nature.

He was within three miles of Forlorn Gap when his dread materialized into something definite. At first glance he mistook it for an apparition, but soon it became recognizable as a team of plodding horses, drawing what appeared to be a commonplace covered wagon.

A bright southerly moon spread its light gently over team and canvas and a lone man who sat mid-seat as driver. Winters raised a gloved hand and drew his hat down tight. That same hand lowered to his sixgun and made a slight, reassuring adjustment there. He would have turned aside, had he yielded to natural impulse, for popping sweat had already chilled his face; but fear of cowardice outweighed his fear of a lone stranger, and he rode straight on until Cannon Ball and team were side by side.

"Hello, there!" Winters shouted, the neighborliness in his voice bearing a strained quality.

Horses, mistaking his greeting to mean "whoa," stopped abruptly. Immediately Winters perceived that here was a wagon-driver unlike any he had ever seen before. His feet were spread wide, one being bound by rawhide thongs at each forward wagon-corner. His hands, though clutched around driving lines, were extended, motionless. His eyes were open, but they cast an unchanging reflection of moonlight. Head and face were rigid. Lips remained closed.

"Queer time to be traveling," said Winters, scared, but professionally curious.

Still there was no response. Nor was there any perceptible movement, any sound except that of wind sweeping

between wagon spokes and over lifting and falling canvas. Whether scent or silent movement, something caused Cannon Ball to rear and leap away. In those few seconds required for Winters to regain a secure saddle-position, Cannon Ball reached his top speed and pounded like a horse running wild toward Forlorn Gap.

Winters looked back, but if there was a covered wagon anywhere it had become invisible, merged perhaps into that great white barrenness of flat earth that swept south and west, itself to blend with that tumbling, rugged wall of dark, western hills. Shuddering, Winters faced homeward. And never before had those fast-brightening lights ahead presented such a welcome sight.

NIGHT WAS still young in Forlorn Gap's streets and public houses. Doc Bogannon's saloon, only institution of its kind at this crossroads place of mystery and odd mingling of order and lawlessness, had more than its customary crowd of travelers, card-players, yarn-spinners, and all-around queers and freaks. Bogannon had been rushed for an hour, but now he had a spell in which to wash and polish glasses. This was also a time when he could look over his guests and garner his usual measure of philosopher's pleasure, peculiar to a big man with a big heart and a sympathetic, understanding mind.

But unexpectedly his front door swung open and a smiling stranger came stealthily in. This newcomer was small and thin, bareheaded, and ashen in complexion. He approached unsteadily and laid his arms on Bogie's bar. "Hee-hee," he laughed crazily, and his body shook with nervous mirth.

Bogannon himself was tall and massive, with a splendid head and face, black-haired, clean-shaved, bearing

despite his clean white apron a statesman's dignity and stature. To him, his thriving business notwithstanding, there was nothing more interesting than human beings. This newcomer in particular interested him, even touched a spot of commiseration in his generous depths.

"Heard a funny story?" asked Bogie, gazing at his visitor solemnly.

Another crazy giggle rippled out. "Hee-hee. I tricks 'em, I did."

"Would you mind telling your name?" asked Doc.

"Me? Why, don't you know? I'm Gatewood Lavin. People sometimes call me Gate. Sometimes they call me Laffin Gate. But one way or t'other, that's me all right."

"And you tricked them, did you?"

"Hee-hee. Sure, I tricks 'em." He made an encircling gesture round his head. "Like that," he said, leering comically. "They think they got me smothered dead, but I tricks 'em." Gate Lavin shook again with silent laughter.

He was still laughing when a heavy foot pounded an outside board. Gatewood stared in horror at an opening door. Suddenly he darted round a corner of Bogie's bar and peered warily over its top,

*No wonder, thought Bogie. I'm scared myself.*

A huge man who bore positive resemblance to an ape shoved himself in and advanced with a heavy, undulating, humping stride toward Bogannon. He laid down a silver coin. "Whiskey," he said hoarsely.

Doc poured a drink and caught himself staring in indefinable and awesome curiosity. Doc was over six feet tall, powerful of build and possessed of impressive poise of a cultivated sort. Here was a strange character, bigger and more powerful than he. The newcomer was easily six-feet-six, his ponderous shoulders

lumpy with muscle. His poise was superior to that of Bogannon, being unstudied, like that of a powerful horse. His hat was black, small, and pulled into a beak in front. His face was shaved, except for a mustache that was tufted like a wad of black wool under his nose. About him there was a cadaverous smell, and his clothes were filthy with grime.

"I hear it's right chilly outside," said Doc nervously.

For response he received a prolonged grunt that jarred at its end.

"I don't happen to recall your name," said Doc, in exercise of professional friendliness.

"Quimby Large, I be, sir." Large leaned toward Doc and blinked his small, beady eyes. "But you thinks you knows me, huh?"

"No," Bogie replied quickly. "Never had seen you before this moment."

"Dot's good," said Large. He picked up his glass and moved directly to a vacant table in a far corner.

And while Large's back was turned, Gatewood Lavin emerged from hiding and made a tip-toeing, hasty exit.

**D**OC BOGANNON drew a deep breath, took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. He tried to swallow, but in order to succeed comfortably found it necessary to wet his goozle with wine.

He was polishing a glass when a man of medium sorts rose from a table and came forward, grinning. Doc had noticed him before, his conspicuousness due to an eyetooth which had been crowned with gold.

"I'm Harrison Abendroth, Doc."

"Glad to know you," said Bogie. He glanced unwittingly at Abendroth's shiny, gold tooth, exposed by an habitual half-grin.

Abendroth leaned toward Doc,

amusement beaming on his round, unattractive mug. "Say, did you see that scared monkey skitter out of here!"

Bogie arched an eyebrow. It was always amusing to hear a chimpanzee call his brother a monkey. "Do you refer to my friend Gatewood Lavin?"

"Yeah, him," said Abendroth.

"Yes, I saw him leave," said Bogie. "Right interesting fellow, this Gate Lavin. Does he happen to be a friend of yours?"

"What! Me a friend of him? Never saw him before. Kind of cuckoo, wasn't he?" was the quick reply.

Bogie's eyes narrowed from mild suspicion. He wasn't sure whether Harrison Abendroth was acting a part, or was just plain stupid. At any rate, Bogie was inwardly warned to be careful. "I say, now, you don't happen to be a Boston Abendroth, do you?"

Abendroth squared himself and looked important. "Naw. But I been to Boston, though." He shoved his upper lip upward with a dirty finger. "See that gold tooth?"

"I had noticed it," said Bogie. "What about it?"

"I had that done in Boston."

Comment forming on Bogie's tongue was arrested. A tall, lean newcomer had barged in and was striding toward them. "Winters!" exclaimed Bogie. "Your presence is both welcome and comforting. What will it be?"

Winters leaned heavily against Bogie's polished bar and half-turned for a quick survey of his guests. "Wine, Doc."

Bogie filled a glass with sparkling red liquid. "Winters, you wear a worried look; must have come across Alkali Flat?"

Winters swung round and picked up his drink. "Doc, how can you always tell?"

"You are a man who sees ghosts, and there's no place hereabouts reputedly so haunted as Alkali Flat."

"Why I ever venture across it, is

beyond me. Must be I've got a short memory. I never come that way, but what I run into something spooky." Winters drained his glass and eyed, meanwhile, a dumb bumpkin who stared at him with owl eyes and kept his upper lip lifted on one side of his nose. Winters glanced at Bogie, then at Owl-eyes. "What is his significance, Doc?"

"A thousand pardons," said Bogie. "Deputy Winters, meet my newest friend, Harrison Abendroth."

To avoid a handshake, Winters turned to Bogie. "Doc, I'll bet you two drinks against one that back where your new friend came from, he was called Gold-tooth Harry."

Bogie leaned back against a shelf and folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not a gambling man, Winters."

**H**ARRISON ABENDROTH slapped his hand flat in front of Winters. "I'll take that bet, and my word will have to decide it. I've never been called Gold-tooth Harry, here, there, or anywhere."

"My curiosity tortures me," said Winters; "what do folks call you?"

Abendroth drew back his shoulders. "Where I came from, sir, I was called Harry Albatross."

Bogie's face looked like that of a horrified woman. "Dear me! An albatross is a bird of ill omen. Please, don't advertise that name around here."

"And don't venture onto Alkali Flat," said Winters. He planked down a coin. "Pay off my debt, Doc, but excuse me from drinking with an albatross. Goodnight."

Abendroth, gold tooth shining, stared after Winters. "Smart deputy marshal! I guess that will teach him a lesson."

Bogie set up a glass. "Whiskey or wine?"

"Which is most expensive?"

“Whiskey.”

“Then make it whiskey, by ganders!”

Bogie brimmed a glass. “You know, Abendroth, Winters made it two against one.”

Abendroth drained his glass. “Then, by ganders, fill her up again.”

While Bogie poured a second time, he saw a huge dark form rise and come toward them in a bouncing, swinging stride.

Abendroth was downing his second drink when Quimby Large, stinking and repulsive, put a long, vile finger on his shoulder. “Be your name Abendroth?” he rumbled hoarsely.

Abendroth took his last swallow and put down his glass. “That it is, sir.” Again he squared his shoulders, and his face, gold tooth shining, cloaked itself in impassive dignity.

“Then you is he,” said Quimby Large. “A man I sees outside is asking about you. He says to me, ‘Sir, if you sees a man name of Abendroth,’ says he, ‘why, now, you tell him I wants to see him.’ Them’s his words, as I live.”

Abendroth’s eyes assumed alert and pleased eagerness. “Did he say anything about being my uncle?”

“Ay,” said Large, “I believe he did, for a fact.”

“Uncle Blaine, was it?” Quimby Large reflected laboriously. “Why, say now, I does believe that was his name, for a fact.”

“Uncle Blaine,” mused Abendroth, smiling broadly. “I didn’t expect to find him this side of Pangborn Gulch. I bet he’s got wind of me and come to meet me; where’s he at?”

Quimby Large swung his arm in a gigantic gesture. “Come right with me, and I show you him in no time.”

Bogie watched them leave, but his somber curiosity was dispelled by a call for whiskey from a group of poker-

players, and a new, vigorous rush of business caused them to pass from his mind.

**O**UTSIDE, Fate took hold of events with unexpected and terrifying swiftness. Harrison Abendroth, intoxicated, yet eager to find his Uncle Blaine, stepped ahead, peering to right and left. Quimby Large, unseen by Abendroth, drew a net from underneath his coat and with wild-animal quickness slipped it over Abendroth’s head, shoulders and body. A drawstring pull tightened it round him so securely he could hardly move a finger. Before he could cry out, Large, still working from behind, drew a gag into his mouth and tied it tight.

“Ah,” said Large, “now we goes to find your Uncle Blaine.”

Harry tried to scream, but only groaned softly. Without delay, Large caught him by a shoulder and his trousers and lifted him onto a horse at Bogannon’s hitchrail. Large mounted a second horse and, leading Abendroth’s, galloped southward onto Alkali Flat.



An hour later, Abendroth lay by a small fire in one of those awesome caverns that were to be found along Alkali’s southwestern rim. Quimby Large and a third man kept him company, and this third man and Large studied a sheet of paper that had writing on it.

“What it say, Shadrack Ruppel?” asked Large.

Ruppel was a much shorter man than Large; but broad and beefy, and as unsavory and queer of eye as Quimby Large. Ruppel ran a finger along as he endeavored to read. “It is about one as was smothered to death; it wants one as was smothered.”

Large stared at his companion. "But we smothered one. Wasn't it a man name of Gate Lavin as we smothered?"

Ruppel stared into Large's beady eyes. "Quim Large, you know what happen to that feller? We ought to locked him in a box, like 'em others."

"Huh?"

Ruppel nodded his head vigorously. "What we ought to done, Quim, because that Laffin Gate sure resurrected hisself and lit out somewhere back there."

Large shoved his hat back and scratched his bushy head. "You mean Gate got away? Umph! What we do now?"

Ruppel ran his finger along as he read again. "Now," he said, "it wants one as is starved to death."

Quim Large was puzzled. "But one is to be smothered. Don't it still want one as is smothered?"

Ruppel in turn was puzzled. "No," he said with a vigorous shake. "That was him back there, that Laffin Gate. We done smothered him; it wants one now as is starved to death." Ruppel stared at Large and jerked a thumb at Harry. "If we locks him in a box now, will he you reckon be starved to death agin we git to Saint Looney?"

Quim Large puckered his lips as if to whistle, though he did not whistle. "How many days is it to Saint Looney?"

"About a month, I figures."

Large nodded slowly. "That would about make it; he ought to starve putty good in a month. How many we got now, Shadrack?"

Ruppel laid down his paper and counted on his fingers. "Nineteen it is, Quim."

Large furrowed his swarthy brow. "But I figured this one was to make twenty, and we could start to Saint Looney."

"So he was," said Ruppel. "We

miscounted somewhere." Both of them studied hard, and then Ruppel got it. "It was that feller Laffin Gate, him as got away. That's where our trouble is. We got to get him back, or somebody in his place."

Large shook his head emphatically. "We never catch that one again; I figure he be too scared to stick around. But I figured this one was to make maybe. Shad Ruppel, what kind of man does it say it wants there?"

Ruppel studied his paper, ran his finger along as he read slowly. "It wants a man as is smothered. It wants a man as is lean and tough, with just nothing on his bones but muscle."

"It's that deputy marshal," said Large. "I got him spotted. Right tonight I seed him, and I knows where to catch him." Large stared at Ruppel, puzzlement on his rugged brow. "Shadrack Ruppel, why you reckon that man in Saint Looney want so many dead bodies?"

"Why, Quim, don't you know? He sells 'em to these here doctor schools and such, where they cuts 'em up to see what's inside of 'em. And he gives us a hundred dollars a head."

"He does?" Large thought that over with slow comprehension. "Twenty heads would be twenty hundreds, wouldn't it, Shad?"

"Just about, I figures."

"And that would be how many hundreds apiece?"

Ruppel did some hard calculating, but gave it up. "You got me there, Quim. I guess that feller in Saint Looney can figure it for us." Ruppel pivoted round on his bottom and stared at Harry. "Reckon we ought to fix him up, Quim?"

"I reckon so. He looks like he'd as soon be fixed up as not. You drag in a box and we'll double him up and cram him in it. Might as well let him start starvin' one

time as another.”

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Ruppel went out and came back in a few minutes with a wooden box, two feet wide, three feet long and eighteen inches deep. It had a hinged lid which Ruppel unlatched and turned back. Harry Albatross kicked and tried to yell, but he was well trussed up and gagged, and it was no bother for Large and Ruppel to cram him into his narrow prison.

“Maybe he smother,” said Large.

“He be all right; they holes for air.”

“Maybe he freeze,” said Large.

“Not in cave. He freeze, though, if we take him out to wagon.”

“Ah,” said Large. “What about him as drives for you?”

“Let him drive some more,” said Ruppel, giving his ugly head a jerk. “Long as we got a dead man driving, them painted, whoopin’ Injerns won’t pester us.”

Ruppel closed Harry’s box and fastened its strap-latch. They lay down by their fire then and went to sleep. Harrison Abendroth soon heard them snoring ponderously. He tried to free his limbs, tried to ungag himself, but after a prolonged, fruitless effort, he gave up in sick despair.

**I**N HIS upstairs bedroom, Deputy Marshal Lee Winters lay awake beside his beautiful wife, Myra, who breathed softly in sleep, moonlight on her gentle face. Pressing heavily upon Winters’ brain was a premonition that this small, nuptial paradise was in dire peril of final and violent interruption. Some day, some night, he would ride out on a mission of deadly law enforcement and not return. What would become of Myra then? What would become of that peaceful life on a

ranch in some quiet valley that he might have lived, had he known when to quit this war against wanted monkeys, bloody scoundrels and homicidal maniacs?

Because it was wintertime, their bedroom window was open but a cranny, yet he could distinctly hear noises. Some were familiar, such as passing stagecoaches and riders. Others were familiar only in that he had heard them on other nights. Otherwise they were indefinable and alien to ordinary lands, though peculiarly one with that desolate and haunted region of Alkali Flat. Among those somber voices he heard, either in reality or in fancy, was one that chanted dolefully, “Stay away! Stay away!” It was long after midnight before he sank into tortured sleep.

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Next day he rode to Dead Horse Pass, on Brazerville Road. A letter from Marshal Hugo Landers of Brazerville advised that a robber, or robbers, had taken mail from an eastbound night stage at Dead Horse, and that striking a trail was imperative. Before sundown, Winters struck a trail, and what he found disclosed there had been three robbers. Winters always experienced heart flutter and cold perspiration when tracking just one bad customer; three bad ones made odds entirely unacceptable. He gave up and turned homeward. He would not send old Huggie a false report, however; he merely would not send any.

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It was close to another midnight when he again came within sight of home lights in Forlorn Gap. Chilled, aching bones turned his thoughts toward Doc Bogannon’s saloon.

Bogie's place was still open for business, though customers had dwindled down to five. Four had a nip of wine and departed. Then there was but one, and being alone with him gave Bogie a bad case of shivers.

Quimby Large sat with huge humped shoulders at a table and watched Bogie, like a cat watching a mouse hole.

Bogie nervously polished his last glass. "Waiting for somebody?" he asked, casually.

"Huh?" said Large, startled. "Why, uh-huh. I been waiting long time for somebody."

"Well," said Bogie, "I regret to advise that it is time to close up and go home."

"Ain't midnight," said Large. "You not close before midnight."

Bogie looked at his watch. "Doesn't lack enough to count. So—"

His door opened and closed with a bang.

"Winters!" Bogie exclaimed, stirred by relief and genuine pleasure. "Am I glad to see you!"

Winters came up, taking off his gloves. "A touch of wine, Doc; my bones feel like icicles."

"I was just about to close up," said Bogie. "Let's make it a nightcap, with drinks on me."

"You're elected," said Winters, turning to a table.

Bogie joined him with a bottle and two glasses. He spoke in a nervous, low voice. "Sure glad you dropped in, Winters. That ogre over there almost had me seeing ghosts. His name is Quimby Large, and I like neither his looks nor his smell."

Winters saw a form more monstrous than human rise and come humping, rocking toward them. He slid his chair back a couple of feet to give his gun hand room for quick action.

Instead of a weapon, Quimby Large

carried a paper in his right hand. He stopped, towering and stinking, above them. His beady eyes fixed themselves impassively upon Winters. "You Deputy Marshal Winters?"

Winters had a clammy sensation. "I am," he said uneasily.

"Then take a look," said Large. He handed his paper to Winters. It was a reward poster, its picture a likeness of one Ditney Gilmer, notorious robber of stagecoaches who had been hanged several years before. Large added, "Split halvers, and I tell you where you catch him."

Winters furrowed his brow, perplexed and angry. Here was a filthy monkey who was up to no good. "Might trade you," Winters said musingly.

"But not tonight," said Bogie. "Winters, it's late."

"He be gone tomorrow," said Large.

Winters held his glass for more wine. Meanwhile he kept a wary eye on Quimby Large. "Where is this wanted monkey?"

"That I show you; you come?"

Doc Bogannon was uneasy. This hybrid between a gorilla and a caveman had vague association with missing men in Bogie's thoughts. Just then his mind was confused as to identity of any particular individual, but a consciousness of something wrong gripped him with cold horror. "Winters, don't go. If that outlaw leaves before tomorrow, it will be good riddance."

Winters got up and wiped sweat off his forehead. "Doc, you'd make a coward of me; I'm scared enough, as it is." He nodded to Quimby Large. "Man, I'm at your heels."

"Dot's good," said Large. He turned abruptly and went humping out.

WINTERS followed, and as Bogie's door closed behind him his hat was knocked off and something descended

with incredible swiftness over his head and shoulders and down to his hips. A quick tug from behind drew it fiercely tight around his body. Too swiftly for shock to yield to a cry for help, a gag was drawn viciously into his mouth and secured remorselessly.

"Now, I show you him," said Large. With an ease that was both humiliating and terrifying to Winters, Large lifted him into his saddle.

Soon Large was mounted and leading Cannon Ball southwestward across Alkali Flat. Winters' horse allowed himself to be led, but fractiously. Twice he reared and pawed at his captor, but getting only hard jerks for his pains he became tractable and loped angrily along.

Large had not bothered to take Winters' six-gun. His wild-animal cunning had not extended that far; such intelligence as he possessed, manifested itself in behavior comparable to what might have been taught to a well-bred dog. He rode hunched forward, clung to Cannon Ball's bridle rein, but paid only slight attention to Winters.

In that inattentiveness Winters found a fragile, desperate hope. He could have disengaged his legs and fallen off his horse, but that would have got him nothing except a jolt and a mouthful of alkali, for he would promptly have been handed up again and possibly tied on like a sack of horse feed. In a careless moment, Large might have allowed Cannon Ball to jerk loose; but that promised little, for Cannon Ball was trained not to run with bridle reins dragging.

Winters had been caught in this straight jacket of netting as he was grabbing for his gun. He discovered now that by lowering his right shoulder he could free his hand, grasp his gun handle and thumb its hammer. He could not draw, however, and nothing was to be gained by

firing straight down. Yet with a familiar, deadly object in his grasp, fierce, angry determination stiffened his spirits. Ghost voices, pouring up from Alkali Flat and down from a star-jammed sky, became a medley of taunt and wild cheering in his ears, exciting desperate, violent thought and a sudden fury of action.

With both spurs, Winters raked Cannon Ball's sensitive flanks, an infuriating punishment which Cannon Ball had never taken without a rearing, twisting protest. He reared now, squealed, and his hoofs beat into emptiness. In that noisy, explosive instant, Winters leaned back and, by aiming his body to give direction to his sixgun, drove two bullets through its open-ended holster into Quimby Large's huge, stinking body. Cannon Ball's frantic kangaroo leap unseated Winters, but he stiffened his left foot, made of it a hook in his stirrup, and let himself be dragged by his rearing, lunging horse.

When going got too rough for further endurance, Winters withdrew his foot and rolled to a stop, eyes smarting and mouth dry and stinging with alkali dust. Far off to his right he heard Quimby Large crying dolefully, "Oh, Shadrack! Oh Shadrack, I'm shot—I'm shot. Oh, Shadrack!"

Winters sat up. Punishment had yielded its reward. His imprisoning net, dragged across sharp, hard crusts of desert, had ripped apart. Winters by repeated contortions got an arm free and took out his pocket knife. Net threads were promptly cut. With net and gag removed, Winters sprang up. Cannon Ball had lunged on for a hundred yards and stopped. Winters, after wetting of bruised lips and repeated efforts, managed a sharp whistle. His horse came skittishly toward him.

Winters met him more than halfway and swung up. For a moment he listened, expecting again to hear that far-off

moaning cry of Quimby Large, but Alkali Flat had lapsed into a solemn hush. An inner voice whispered to Winters that his escape from a monster should teach him caution, but he was too angry to heed its warning. He swung southwest and was off in pursuit of his tormentor.

He found no trace of Large. From a cavernous mountain recess a light glowed dimly. Yet a wary, dismounted search disclosed only a deserted campfire. Large and Shadrack—whoever Shadrack might have been—had fled.

Winters was about to leave when he heard a distorted, muffled groan, and sweat popped in profusion upon his face. Six-gun in hand, he spun round and found; his wide, staring eyes probing. Firelight flickering upon cavern walls revealed no living things. Not until his vision fell upon a rectangular wooden box did he have an inkling from whence had come that agonized, incoherent sound.

Winters holstered his gun. An instant later, box lid thrown back, he gazed upon a tightly bound human body. Or was it still a living man? He touched it, saw and felt it jerk.

**I**N HIS SALOON, Doc Bogannon waited. More than an hour had passed since his friend Deputy Winters left with that gruesome creature who called himself Quimby Large. Odds had been against Winters before, and he had returned. Bogie nevertheless was near abandonment of hope this time, when his front door opened.

“Winters!”

Bogie sprang up as Winters entered, supporting another who, from his

squatting stoop, appeared to be permanently bent three-double.

“A little help, Doc,” said Winters.

Bogie lent a hand at once and they put their burden in a chair by a table.

“Who is he, Winters?”

“A friend of yours, Doc. Fetch whiskey.” As Bogie hastened off, Winters added, “And a swig of wine for me.”

Doc’s unidentified friend clutched at his glass as Bogie poured, then he bent to meet those hands as they rose, trembling and splashing whiskey. After a generous helping, he lowered his hands and stared at Doc and Winters.

“Hee-hee,” he laughed crazily.

Bogie was horrified. “It’s Albatross!” he exclaimed. “And he’s cuckoo. Winters, where did you find him?”

Winters drank wine and drew a hand across his lips. “Spooks had him, Doc. What they wanted with him, I wouldn’t know.”

Bogie stared at Harrison Abendroth. “Winters, I didn’t recall that his hair was gray.”

“It wasn’t, Doc.”

Bogie went for another glass. He resumed his seat, took a drink of wine and wiped his face with a handkerchief. “What happened to him, Winters?”

Albatross giggled, stared at his companions and curled his upper lip in a half-grin.

Winters arched his eyebrows at Bogie. “I don’t know what happened to him, Doc, but I notice one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“He’s still got his gold tooth.”

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