

There was a sudden influx of hardly desirable-looking persons into town, as well as an upcropping of bodies discovered at daybreak. And it was the strangers, Winters found, who were the victims.



Winters shoved his gun into Tatum's ribs.

MISFORTUNE'S DARLING

A "Lee Winters" Story

by Lon Williams

DEPUTY Marshal Lee Winters, near sundown, pulled his horse up sharply at a turn in Pangborn Road. Out of a gulch, a hundred yards ahead and to his right, a pair of ragged black wings swept up and labored off behind a screen of pines. A buzzard, drifting high and erratically, was only a hungry thing alert for a windborne death-scent. A buzzard rising in alarm from a gulch warned that death had struck.

Winters, who'd heard a rifle shot ten minutes before, found what he'd expected; a dead man, body still limp. He was lying face down, intact except where a bullet had entered his head and a

strong beak had probed and torn. Winters searched, but found nothing that identified him. His money, if he'd possessed any, was gone. Winters turned him over and saw a face he'd never seen before; a young face, no more than twenty-five, and of good quality.

Whoever the killer was, he couldn't have been far off. Tracks around indicated there'd been two or three riders. "Sure a heap of killin' here lately," Winters observed with a sense of outrage.

Something stirred, and his horse, Cannon Ball, snorted and turned to leave for home, bridle reins dragging. Winters, as quick as a scared cat, ducked

and rolled as a rifle cracked. A bullet, meant for him, struck a rock where he'd been crouching and sang into space.

Winters wanted no truck with drygulchers; he made a flying leap into his saddle, gathered reins as Cannon Ball took on speed, and headed for healthier country. A searching backward glance disclosed nothing except a rocky elevation, rising sixty or more feet. Its boulders, of course, concealed a gun-monkey. But Winters knew when he was well off; as soon as he'd hit Pangborn Road, he swung south and made tracks for Forlorn Gap, a rugged twenty miles away.

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Doc Bogannon's saloon had enjoyed an unusual run of business. For reasons unknown to Doc, Forlorn Gap had recently accumulated as great an assortment of strangers as he'd seen there since gold was struck in Pangborn Gulch. Being a fair judge of human beings, he couldn't say they were an exactly desirable sort, either.

Doc looked at his watch and discovered it was almost midnight. He dried a few glasses and polished them. Meanwhile, without being too obtrusive, he cast an interested eye upon two customers who showed no inclination to depart. One was a small-chinned, pouty fellow of about forty, who'd occupied a far corner for hours and denied himself all pleasures, including drink. At a table up close sat another gent, who had strolled in only a few minutes before. He was a handsome sort, thirty-five possibly, well-dressed, clean-shaved, and obviously quite contented and satisfied with himself.

Doc Bogannon, who was tall and big—and would have looked more in his element in a foreign ministry, or on a judge's bench, than he looked behind a bar—allowed himself more curiosity about people than ordinarily was permissible. He put away his last glass and looked down at his self-satisfied guest. "Don't believe I've made your acquaintance, young man."

His guest smiled and in doing so revealed both his fine white teeth and his tickled vanity. "Thanks for acknowledging that I'm a young man, sir." He got up and came forward, hand extended. "My name, Mr. Bogannon, is Conrad Peyton. Boston Peytons, if you will indulge a little pride on my part."

"That I will," declared Bogie cordially. His big hand closed on fingers that were long and soft. "You're sure within your rights in being proud of Boston origin."

"Thank you, sir; I am, indeed, proud of it. In fact, I consider myself in every way a most fortunate person."

"Now, I'd say you're one in a million," Bogie declared enthusiastically. "Most people I see have got a gripe of some sort. Men come in here with headaches and complain that it's our climate. Some load up with gold, lose it all in a poker game, and grouch because there's something wrong with our country. Last month a couple of bearded, gold-seeking tobacco-chewers rode into Forlorn Gap from Missouri on their way to Pangborn Gulch. They stayed all night at Goodlett Hotel and next morning, without any explanation at all, headed back to Missouri; never took so much as a nugget for a souvenir. Meeting you, Peyton, is a real pleasure."

"Thank you, sir. As for my having anything to complain about, I've never had it. Everything has worked out to my good fortune. Just let me—"

DOC'S BATWINGS swung and Deputy Marshal Lee Winters strode in.

"Winters!"

"How about a sip of wine, Doc?"

"Sure thing, Winters," said Bogie, reaching back. "You used to demand whiskey. Not getting soft, eh?"

Winters ignored Doc's gibe. He washed down his wine and asked for a refill. "Doc, I'm mad, and at nobody but myself. Can you give me one good reason why a man of ordinary intelligence would want to be a deputy marshal?"

Bogie grinned. "You stuck your neck out that time, Winters. I've often said that if you were a man of ordinary intelligence, you *wouldn't* be a deputy marshal."

Winters sniffed. "It's mighty small help I ever get from you."

He swung round and stared at Conrad Peyton. Outside, he'd observed a hard-ridden horse hitched at Doc's hitchrail; maybe this smooth gent had been its rider.

Bogie watched them stare at each other a moment. "Ah, Winters, there's a man you ought to talk to: Conrad Peyton. He's found life's long-hidden secret. Peyton, meet Deputy Marshal Lee

Winters.”

Winters held onto his wine glass. He seldom shook hands with strangers. He didn't want to shake hands with some toad he might later have to shoot. “I didn't know life had any long-hidden secrets.”

“Secret of happiness and contentment, Winters. Everything, Peyton says, has worked out to his good fortune; he has nothing whatever to complain about.”

Winters looked him over coldly. He was almost as tall as Winters, slight of stature, dark-haired, thin-faced, with eyes that glittered rather than smiled. Winters didn't like him. “Maybe you're living under a gourd vine, Peyton.”

“Gourd vine?”

“Yeah, gourd vine. When I was a button, my ma read something to me about a man named Jonah. He had a gourd vine, and he was a happy man. Then along come a worm and et his gourd vine. Maybe you've got a worm in your future.” Winters nodded towards a rear corner, where a morose gent sat alone. “Who's that bag of sour apples, Doc?”

Doc wrinkled his big forehead and scratched a corner of it. “Whitbee, I believe I've heard him called. Ranse Whitbee.”

Winters jerked his head at Whitbee. “Come up, Ransom, and have a drink; you, too, Peyton.” Winters planked down a couple of coins. “They're on me, Doc. And I'll be telling you goodnight.”

Peyton smiled at Doc when Winters had gone out. “Delightful fellow, isn't he?”

Bogie puckered his mouth and wrinkled his forehead. “Oh, I wouldn't bank on that too much; strikes me, he's sort of bad medicine.”

Doc's batwings swung again, and a stranger entered. And here was a character, thought Doc, if ever was. Dude gambler from a picture book—dark; slender; black suit; stiff-bosom white shirt; diamond studs; high silk hat; bee-stinger mustache; slim, soft hands; delicate fingers; and a virile face that obviously could express every emotion known to mankind.

“Evening, gentlemen. Anticipated you'd be closing soon, Bogannon, and dropped in for a nightcap. Perhaps all of you gentlemen would join me.”

“With pleasure, sir,” said Doc.

“Tatum is my name—Price Tatum. Mining-promoter by profession.”

“And an occasional poker player, no doubt,”

said Bogie.

“Well, who isn't?” Tatum glanced at Peyton and Ranse Whitbee. “Ah,” he said, assuming a downcast look, “but I've met my match at cards. Peyton, here, is an expert.”

“But I never play for myself,” Peyton explained quickly. “Just a friendly game now and then, for some person not so fortunate as I.”

“You was going to play him a game for me,” said Ranse Whitbee.

“So I was, Whitbee.”

“Sorry, gentlemen,” said Doc, “but it's about closing time.”

“Suits me fine,” declared Tatum. “That will make it a short game. Now, a touch of wine, Bogannon, and a deck of cards. No, only some wine; I have cards; an unbroken deck.”

They selected a table, and Doc, with nothing better to do, watched them deal and play. Never before had he seen such slickers. They could slip cards from top, bottom or middle with such dexterity that Doc wasn't sure whether he was seeing right or not. Peyton won and lost, but made steady gain, of course using Ranse Whitbee's money for stakes. Then he drew four aces and a jack of diamonds.

He showed his hand to Whitbee, winked, and waited.

Whitbee, excited so much his fingers were unmanageable, counted down twenty double eagles from a bag that must have contained fifty more. Tatum matched him and called.

“Yippee!” Whitbee yelled. He hugged over eight hundred dollars to his bosom.

Tatum glanced at his watch. “Well, luckily for me, it's midnight. I said I'd met my match, Bogannon, and I now repeat it.” He got up, shook hands with his opponents and left.

“You are a real friend,” said Whitbee, as Peyton put an arm around his shoulders and escorted him out.

Doc collected his glasses, washed and dried them, and proceeded to put out his lights. He went about scratching his wrinkled forehead. What he'd seen left him puzzled. There was something fishy about those slickers, but he couldn't figure them. According to all he'd seen and heard about gamblers, sharpers wound up on top; when a sucker came out loaded, it seemed a reversal of all natural laws.

OUTSIDE Doc's saloon, Conrad Peyton extended his hand for a goodnight. "Where do you live, Whitbee?"

"Napier Canyon. Four miles up Pangborn Road, then off west."

"A bit risky, your riding out alone, in this bright moonlight especially." He gripped Whitbee's hand cordially. "But you're a lucky man, Whitbee; maybe you'll make it all right."

Whitbee hesitated. "With all this money, I guess it is risky." He studied a moment. "Tell you what; you keep it for me till tomorrow."

"Now, that," said Peyton, "is most magnificent of you. But instead of keeping your money, I'll ride with you—see you home. Always enjoyed a moonlight ride, anyhow; as for me, I never carry any money on my person, so there'd be no reason for anybody to rob me."

Horses were at Bogie's hitchrail. Whitbee mounted his, and Peyton took one of those remaining. Shadows obscured a figure lurking nearby.

"Sure nice of you to go along," said Whitbee.

Peyton's voice was loud and friendly. "Ah, think nothing of it, Whitbee; I'd ride as far as Napier Canyon for a friend any time."

They were cantering along a street of deserted shacks when a rider overtook them. "Wait, gentlemen; if you're heading for Pangborn Gulch, I'd like to ride with you."

They stopped.

"Why, it's Price Tatum!" Peyton exclaimed. "Join us, of course. Upon second thought, your going makes it unnecessary for me to proceed further. I was merely riding as far as Napier Canyon with my good friend Whitbee."

"It would be a pleasure to ride with both of you, but of course— Well, Napier Canyon gets me through Goat Head Pass—which is not a point of danger, I suppose, but I understand it's haunted, and I'm skittish of haunted ground at night. Yet I must be in Pangborn Gulch by early tomorrow."

"Then I give you both goodnight and hope to see both of you again soon."

"Goodnight, Peyton," Tatum called cheerily as Peyton turned back. As he and Whitbee started on, he added reassuringly, "Well, Whitbee, we should enjoy a little jaunt together."

Whitbee swung alongside Tatum, and they rode on, Tatum wearing his high silk hat and chatting genially. In open country they urged their horses

into a lope. They passed occasional clusters of scrub pine; rocky ledges; treeless gulches; sharp rises and steep descents; wind funnels, and mountain walls that drew close then receded. A steady rise brought them to Goat Head Pass where their moonlit bodies were silhouetted against a starry sky.

Tatum laughed softly. "I always whistle here to keep up my courage."

"Yeah?" said Whitbee. He'd been fearful of this ride with a man from whom he'd just won over four hundred dollars. He'd kept slightly behind all along, his hand close to a six-gun hidden under his coat. If Tatum tried treachery, it would be too bad for Tatum.

"Well," Tatum said with a sigh, when they'd safely passed between two rocky promontories, "looks like we made it." For no reason that Whitbee could see, Tatum removed his top-hat and lowered it to his saddlehorn.

Whitbee, suspecting immediate treachery then, yanked out his six-gun and half-turned in his saddle. He saw it then, a trap, and he flung a quick shot at a head held motionless above a rock. He missed, but a rifle bullet spat back at him and did not miss.

Whitbee felt its jarring impact; he groaned, and his body drooped.

DEPUTY Winters had gone to bed, but he had not slept. His wife, Myra, breathed regularly at his side. In a raw, wicked land where women were scarce, he'd been lucky enough to marry a young widow who was not only beautiful, but had been endowed by her departed husband with a mining claim and a neat cottage. They slept in a half-story bedroom upstairs, where night winds entered freely—sometimes from across haunted, eerie Alkali Flat; sometimes from Elkhorn Pass and its western mountain environs, and occasionally, though rarely, from barren, hot hills along Pangborn Road.

This was one of those rare occasions, and while Winters lay awake, more angry than nervous because of that close shave he'd so recently had on Pangborn Road, he heard shots—first a six-gun, then a rifle in quick sequence. They told their own bloody story. Six-gun had been first, but had missed; rifle had been second, but had done its work. Sunrise would disclose another dead man, left for buzzard meat in a wayside gulch.

For a few days Winters found life in Forlorn Gap both exciting and enigmatic. One morning half a dozen bearded riders dusted into town, took into their company a tough-looking bozo from Goodlett Hotel and disappeared with him as mysteriously as they'd come. Somebody an hour afterwards found their bozo hanging from a crossbeam in a deserted store building. Deputy Winters figured his game preserve had been rudely invaded, but he assumed that their victim was some baboon who deserved what he'd got and let it go at that.

Next day a stagecoach from Pangborn Gulch was jammed with passengers, all of them shady-looking critters who'd seemed in a big stew to be moving on. Winters spent several hours studying his stack of reward posters, memorizing faces. In another stagecoach that whirled in from Pangborn, he recognized one of those faces. But his wanted monkey was accompanied by six poisonous-looking reptiles with conspicuous guns. In consequence, Winters scratched his head with sour-grape indifference and let a sizable reward slip through his fingers.

He drifted into Bogannon's saloon one evening after a ride in from Midway Junction. Bogie's saloon was crowded.

Winters eased up for a drink. "What's going on in this crazy town, Doc?"

Doc began washing glasses. "I don't know, Winters, but your coming in here is going to hurt business. Look at those gents drifting out; they were perfectly satisfied until you showed up."

Winters picked up his glass of wine and turned his back to Bogannon. Sure enough, meeting was breaking up. "Doc," said Winters, turning to Bogie, "here's a whole menagerie of wanted varmints, but I don't recognize a one of 'em."

"Anyhow," said Bogie, "they've bought their liquor and paid their money, so let them go; besides, it's getting late."

They thinned down to one man. That one man lifted a hand in friendly salute. "Winters, my friend."

"Well, if it ain't our man Jonah," exclaimed Winters. "As satisfied with life as ever, I take it?"

Conrad Peyton smiled broadly. "Life was never more beautiful. Why not have a chair and enjoy it with me?"

"Not a bad idea," said Winters. Glass in hand, he took a chair at Peyton's table. "I'm curious about you, Peyton. If you'll excuse my being a mite

blunt, you're what I'd call a character; I'm always curious about characters."

Peyton drew in his chin and smiled. "Delightful fellow, Winters. But to appease your curiosity, I'm what you might call an industrialist. My interest is gold mining. A Boston company I represent is interested in old claims around Forlorn Gap. Miners may have run off from some valuable deposits here. It has happened before; it could happen again."

Winters was looking at Peyton's delicate fingers. "You know, Peyton, if you hadn't told me your business, I'd have put you down as a card shark."

THAT AMUSED Peyton. When he was through chuckling, he arched his eyebrows. "Truth is, Winters, I do play a fancy hand of poker, but it's only a pastime. I never gamble, though occasionally I play for some less skillful friend who desires to risk a small sum."

"Now that's a cute trick, if you ask me," said Winters, trying in his own mind to figure it out. Here was a stinker all dressed up and polished to a shine; but why should he play poker merely to help a friend? Winters jerked his head at Bogie, who was cleaning up tables. "Doc, some wine for me and my friend here."

Peyton nodded his appreciation. "So considerate of you, Winters."

Bogie brought a bottle and a glass. When he'd put them down, he gave Winters' back a hard nudge.

Just then Bogie's doors squeaked and a guest entered.

"Tatum!" Bogie exclaimed. "Come right in."

"With pleasure, sir."

Winters swung round and surveyed this smooth-voiced newcomer. Now here was a gambler, for a certainty. Tall, slim, dressed to a finish in black suit, white, diamond-studded shirt and high silk hat, and sporting a mustache you could sew buttonholes with.

Peyton greeted him cordially. "Welcome, sir; meet my good friend Deputy Winters."

"Pardon my not shaking hands," said Winters. "You see, my mitts've got gun grease on 'em."

Tatum chuckled appreciatively. "Delightful fellow," he said, his shoulders shaking.

Delightful fellow, eh? Winters made mental note that Peyton also had found him a delightful

fellow.

Peyton, too, was amused. "Another glass, Bogannon."

Bogie brought another glass. This time his thumb gave Winters a hard dig.

"This is luck," said Tatum, easing into a chair. "Winters, I'd just been looking for you. Business matters require my presence in Pangborn Gulch by early tomorrow, and I don't mind saying that I'm a bit leery of riding out of Forlorn Gap alone—because of doubtful-looking characters who've drifted in lately. I wonder if, for adequate compensation of course, you'd be willing to ride out a few miles with me?"

"Money talks with me," declared Winters; "for ten dollars, I'll ride ten miles."

"Most reasonable," declared Tatum.

"More than that," Winters proposed, "if Peyton will play my hands, I'll gamble you for that ten."

Doc Bogannon, cleaning up behind his bar, cleared his throat with extraordinary force.

Tatum's face became expressionless. "Which means I'd lose, of course. But I'm game. Bogannon, a deck of cards. No, never mind; I have a deck, seal unbroken."

Winters slid round beside Peyton. "If Peyton loses, I ride with you for free; if he wins, you'll hand me twenty. Right?"

Tatum put down an eagle. "Right."

Peyton won. Tatum took up his eagle and handed Winters a double eagle.

Doc Bogannon left his work and came round to watch as Winters slapped his double eagle down.

"Win that and there's a free ride to boot. Lose, and you double it."

Tatum considered it. "Tell you what, Winters. I'm no poker player, but if you'd care for a short game, I'll take you on."

Bogie giggered Winters until it must have hurt.

Winters appeared not to feel it. "Tatum, you're on."

BOGIE SHOOK his head sadly. Here was trouble, but he couldn't help a man who wouldn't be helped. He almost wept when Winters unbuttoned his shirt, unfastened a money belt and counted out five hundred dollars. Bogie grieved not so much for that five hundred, as for those hundreds Winters did not count out. In some ways Winters was a shrewd man; in other ways he impressed Bogie as being pretty dumb. He always

had money, and crooks far and wide were well aware of it. Someday, or some night, Winters would get relieved of a small fortune—and possibly his life.

Both Tatum and Peyton were masters of their art. To save his neck, Bogie couldn't have told whether they dealt from top or bottom; they were that fast. It was a seesaw business until at last Peyton leaned over and showed Winters a hand of four aces and a jack of diamonds.

Winters counted down seven hundred dollars.

Tatum covered it and called. He shrugged as Winters garnered in his fourteen hundred smackers. "Well, Peyton, I should've known better, but it was a nice game." He glanced at his watch. "Winters, shall we ride?"

"Ready," said Winters, stuffing his money belt and restoring it to its place under his shirt.

Doc Bogannon made one more effort. "Winters, there's a letter here somewhere for you. I'd almost forgotten it."

"It can wait till I get back." He patted Peyton's back. "You're a world champion, Peyton; sure do appreciate it. Be glad to split with you, too."

"Not a cent, Winters. I never play for profit. It was a pleasure, and, with your permission, I'll say goodnight."

Peyton was out and gone seconds before Tatum had collected and put away his cards. Bogie shook his head disconsolately and took a farewell look at his friend Lee Winters. Tatum went out ahead, but Winters followed without a backward glance.

Suddenly Doc understood their fame. Tatum and Peyton were in cahoots. Their trick was to discover who had money, then to get it—not by gambling, but by robbery and murder. Now that he thought of it, they'd worked their scheme on half a dozen other suckers, not one of whom had ever showed up again.

Doc hurried out for a final desperate try. "Winters!"

But Winters and Tatum were riding off. Winters heard, of course, but he gave Bogie no mind.

Bogie sighed. "Oh, well, I've been uneasy about him other times."



Their road north was a winding, dusty stage road. Midnight was still, except for a wind that whispered gently through scrub pines and over

barren, rocky hilltops, an occasional wolf howl, or quavering cry of an owl.

Winters had managed to have Tatum on his right, an arrangement to which Tatum voiced no exception.

"It's a pleasant ride at night, Winters. At no other time is one so aware of life's mystery, as well as uncertainty. Tonight we are here; tomorrow night we may be in eternity."

"You said it, Tatum," Winters commented dryly.

Tatum looked over his shoulder at Winters, who had dropped a little behind. "Scared, Winters?"

"Not at all; why should I be?"

"No reason, of course. We'll soon be over Goat Head Pass. After that, I shall consider that just about all danger is behind us."

"What danger do you have in mind, Tatum?"

Tatum chuckled mirthlessly. "Not any specific danger. One merely has a premonition sometimes; well, this is one of those times."

THEY WERE ascending toward that rugged ridge top known as Goat Head Pass. Winters moved up and shoved his six-gun into Tatum's ribs. "Hold it, Tatum."

They stopped.

"Well, Winters, this is a queer turn. I employed you to give me safe escort; you turn out to be a traitor."

"Possibly," said Winters. "Get off, on this side."

Tatum hesitated. Winters shoved harder.

"All right, Winters. But you haven't forgotten that two men can witness against you. Peyton and Bogannon." He swung down, and Winters slid down at his back.

"Turn around, Tatum." When he'd turned, Winters snatched a gun from Tatum's underarm holster and shoved it under his own belt. "Now, take off your coat and hat; we're swapping."

"Winters, you're crazy." But he obeyed reluctantly, and when they resumed their ride, Tatum was wearing Winters' hat and riding Cannon Ball. Winters was riding Tatum's blaze-faced roan and wearing a black coat and a high-topped hat. He kept his six-gun in hand, its hammer back.

A hundred yards from Goat Head Pass, Tatum started to whistle, then he checked himself suddenly.

"Ah," said Winters. "So there's a trap? I figured

as much. Well, you've got one small chance, Tatum. Keep your mouth shut tight; if you don't I'll kill you instantly." Winters did not state an alternative he was thinking about, but if Tatum kept his mouth shut, his drygulching crony probably would kill him, thus saving Winters a bit of trouble.

Winters began to whistle. Meanwhile he kept a sharp eye on Goat Head Pass. On their left was a rocky crow's nest, a perfect spot for a gun-monkey. Winters saw something move. Moonlight bathed them into excellent targets, but they passed through Goat Head safely.

Winters did not look back, but he had not a doubt that here was where he was supposed to get shot. Then he had a bright thought. Some signal had been omitted. A sudden inspiration, like those which had saved his skin in many tight spots, flashed in his head. That high silk hat had a purpose; not only did it distinguish between friend and foe, it was also a means of signaling.

Winters reached up with his left hand and took it off.

Instantly Tatum half turned and yelled, "No, Peyton! No!" But his yell had come too late. A rifle spat, and Tatum jerked and tumbled from his saddle.

Winters, dismounted and stood behind Cannon Ball. From Goat Head's mass of rocks a man disengaged himself and scrambled down. "Why did you yell, Tatum? Didn't you want him shot?"

Winters mumbled unintelligibly, impersonating Tatum as nearly as he could. Peyton hit solid ground and came up at a trot. He stopped, rifle in his left hand.

"Reach," said Winters.

"Winters!"

"Yeah, Peyton. I'm that worm that's come to eat your gourd vine. Want to gamble on it?"

Peyton stilled. Then he shook his head. "No. Winters, I know when I'm beat." He let go his rifle, but as it fell, his hand swept to an undercover gun. It was a derringer, and it exploded in Winters' face.

But Winters, anticipating a final trick, had triggered. Goat Head Pass and nearby cliffs thundered with echoes.

DOC BOGANNON sat alone in his saloon. He'd heard gunfire northward on Pangborn Road, a six-gun and a smaller gun, so close together he couldn't remember which had come first.

Bogie's mouth was dry, his face swathed in sweat. "Why, look at me!" he exclaimed to himself. "Worrying like a woman." Then he thought of Myra Winters. He could imagine what misery she'd be going through, if she knew where her man had gone. It was a blessing she didn't know.

Bogie waited. Fifteen minutes seemed like so many hours.

Then he heard a horse loping into town.

Seconds later his batwings swung in. A man in black coat and high silk hat stood before him. Bogie swallowed, then shouted, "Winters!"

Blood was seeping down Winters' face, but the deputy marshal was grinning. "How do I look, Doc?"

Doc got up and wiped sweat. "Winters, you look like an idiot."

Winters moved unsteadily to a chair, took off his high-top hat and examined its holes, where a derringer slug had entered and left it. "I can do with a little surgery, Doc; how about some water and a bandage?"

Doc hastened to get them, and when he had

Winters fixed up, he remembered something. "I was only stalling about that letter, Winters, but one *did* come a few minutes ago. Midnight stage from Brazerville." He handed it to Winters.

Winters handed it back. "Read it, Doc. Right now, I've got spots before my eyes."

Doc opened it and read. *Deputy Marshal Lee Winters. Dear Winters: Vigilantes have organized and gone hog-wild in Pangborn Gulch. They're hanging every man who even looks crooked. Keep your eye peeled for dangerous fugitives. Yours truly, Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

Bogie stared at Winters. "My stars! So that's why this town's filled up with cutthroats. Winters, I'm about to drop dead."

"Yeah," said Winters, turning his groggy head from side to side. "Sure nice to have a tip-off though. You can always depend on old Huggie to come through in a pinch."

