

WIZARD OF FORLORN GAP

Lee Winters Story

by Lon Williams

Something was wrong in Forlorn Gap; this fancy doctor had come in, and, suddenly just about everyone was awfully sick.

DEPUTY Marshal Lee Winters staggered across Rocky Point's dusty main street and found his horse at Press McNew's hitchrail. Upon his third try, he mounted. Guided by homing instinct, he rode out and headed north. Blood stained his hand when he had touched it to his head. Guns still roared in his brain; he could still see a man crumpling and falling.

Cannon Ball, horse sense telling him, too, that he was homeward bound, swung into a determined, long-legged lope. His trail led him through narrow gorges, into lonely canyons, along precarious precipices and shelves of dark, tumbling mountains.

Winters exercised no independent will. Indeed, he had none to exercise; he was no more than intermittently aware of his whereabouts—until by starlight and a silvery quarter-moon he came to his senses in a vast wasteland. Even then his consciousness was dreamlike. A level grayness spread away in every direction into impenetrable gloom, eerie, wind-whipped and cold. For a moment he had an odd, dreadful impression of his having passed through death into a world of eternal twilight and solitude. That impression lingered on when he realized hazily that this was Alkali Flat, a lonely region whose desolate face and stinging dust suggested kinship with things alien and ghostly.

Cannon Ball had stopped. Winters, casting desperately about to learn why, saw a man standing to his right, straight and motionless in a small round cap, his body of excellent proportions now real, now spectral, as haze alternately lifted and descended across Winters' peering eyes.

"Howdy," said Winters, not so much to be polite as to reassure himself of reality.

A question was his answer, rendered in a clear, friendly voice. "Sir, would you kindly direct me to Forlorn Gap?"

"Sure," said Winters. A wave of dizziness caused him to grasp his saddle horn. "Forlorn Gap is straight north." He stared, puzzled, for an unusual number of lights blinked distantly, as if nobody there had gone to bed. "F'lorn Gap's where you see—where—you—see—" His words lost themselves in thick mental darkness. In returning twilight he saw a form that might have been a man speeding northward, on foot. To his amazement that form rose and seemed to settle upon an invisible horse; seconds later this rider, or apparition, had disappeared into nothingness.

That he had seen a ghost was a conclusion that would have come easily to Winters, even when his mind was at its best. Alkali Flat by night was a haunted place, reputedly uninhabited except by those fantastic things that cast no shadows—a dreary, solemn desert where creatures long dead reassembled their former shapes, recalled voices and songs long hushed.

For a moment Winters was puzzled at his own presence upon Alkali Flat. Then he remembered his gunfight at Rocky Point; his bullet-grazed head, now aching as numbness lifted; his sudden longing to go home—those few lucid intervals that stood as landmarks of light on a dark back trail.

Even yet his awareness came and went. He found that, without command, Cannon Ball had started onward; he saw that Forlorn Gap's lights had grown brighter. Then a twilight-zone of half-conscious terror settled round him, to prey upon his natural dread of Alkali Flat. Ghost riders joined him. They crowded close, skeletal faces leering. Minutes later they receded and dissolved. A lone wolf-howl, windborne from afar, swelled into a chorus, distilled into countless snarling mouths. Whispering, moaning wind became a medley of war-drums and death-chants. At last imagined storm, desert, and night in united force disgorged a



Spectral figures seemed to mock and gibber at Winters as he rode, slumped down, his senses reeling.

terrifying host that drove him into panic.

"Cannon Ball!" he screamed. "Go!" He lashed hard with leather, raked with spurs, bent low as his horse leaped and plunged. Cannon Ball's swift hoof-beats evolved into a beat of great wings. On those wings Winters, momentarily crazed, imagined himself borne aloft, out of space and time.

NIGHT LIFE in Forlorn Gap centered upon one spot where lights glowed brightly and voices, whether friendly, excited, cold or harsh, had their natural qualities accentuated by whiskey and wine. Doc Bogannon, busiest man in town, had no leisure for indulgence of his philosophical propensities until hours had passed and his guests had dwindled down to a mere handful. Then his attention turned to an early-middle-aged individual who had made himself conspicuous by an extraordinary proclivity

for friendliness.

"What has happened to you?" inquired Bogannon.

"Happened to me? Why do you ask that?"

Bogannon finished a glass he had been polishing and set it back. "Your name, as I recall from yesterday, is Willie Adair. Yesterday, also, you were—if you will pardon my saying so—surly and snappish. Tonight— Well, I've never seen a man in pleasanter mood."

Adair was slender. In texture he suggested rawhide toughness; he had pale blue eyes, sandy hair, and a six-gun he wore with professional ease. Yet he smiled at Bogie. "Pleasant mood? You must be mistaken about yesterday; I was never in anything but a pleasant mood. I am a man without an enemy; I love everybody."

Bogannon himself was tall, broad, dark-haired, of noble head and stature. Like many other men

who sojourned in this land of gold, crime, excitement, and sudden death, he allowed his past to remain a mystery. Yet a mere glance would have disclosed to a discerning judge that nature had designed him for great things—to which destiny his ownership of a semi-ghost-town saloon and marriage to an amorous half-breed Shoshone stood in curious and inexplicable contradiction.

Although Bogannon was an excellent judge of men, tolerant and charitable toward them, too, Willie Adair was a puzzle and a source of uneasiness. “I have seen men before now who apparently loved their fellow men,” he said. Meantime, he regarded Adair suspiciously. “Until now I had not seen a sober man who hated mankind yesterday, then loved all men today. How do you explain such radical change in your disposition?”

Adair looked oddly at Bogannon. “Change? Why, sir, I have not changed; you see me as I have always been—nobody’s enemy, every man’s friend.”

“Pardon my being repetitious, Adair, but yesterday you appeared to be nobody’s friend and everybody’s enemy. This is at least disturbing.”

Adair leaned against Bogie’s shiny bar, careless and at ease. “Appearances can be deceiving, Bogannon. You could be mistaken as to my identity. I don’t think you even saw me yesterday; I have no recollection of being here then.”

Bogannon’s batwings swung inward slowly, and a lean, tough, swarthy man with a bloody head staggered in, swayed, almost fell backwards, then advanced slowly.

“Winters!” exclaimed Bogie. “Winters!”

He hurried round, assisted Winters to a chair, took off his friend’s hat and examined his head.

“What’s wrong, Doc?” said Winters, eyes wide with a puzzled stare.

Bogie straightened Winters in his chair. “Winters, you’re hurt; easy now, while I fetch a drink.”

In turning away, Doc observed a fierce, hostile expression on Willie Adair’s strangely-hardened face. Adair had lifted his six-gun.

Adair glanced at Bogie and jerked his head toward Winters. “Who’s he, Bogannon?”

“Put up that gun,” Bogie replied sharply. “This man is your friend; you’re a man who loves everybody, remember?”

Adair holstered his gun, drew a hand across his eyes, shook his head. “Sure,” he said. “What got

into me anyhow? For a second there I had a mighty queer feeling, like maybe I was somebody else.”

“I’m glad it’s over,” said Doc. He hurried back with glass and wine. His hand shook as he poured a drink and held it to Winters’ lips.

Winters drank slowly, paused, shook his head and stared at Bogannon. Half a dozen men gathered round and looked on curiously. Winters, staring at them, saw a group of strangers. There was one exception. At Willie Adair he looked a second time; he blinked his eyes, then looked a third time.

“Who’s he, Doc?”

Bogie displayed a light-heartedness he did not feel. “Adair is his name, Winters. Willie Adair. Adair is one of these fellows who loves everybody.”

Winters stared without responsive friendliness. “Yeah. I’ve seen him somewhere before—maybe just his picture.”

BOGANNON chilled, afraid Winters might remember Adair as a wanted monkey and get himself killed. He covered up anxiously. “Adair is a good friend of mine. Yes, sir, a fine man, this Adair. Hold steady, Winters, while I get something to dress that gash above your right ear.” He hurried off and came back with a basin of water, medicine and cloths.

“Help you, Doc?” asked a bystander.

“Thanks, but I can manage.”

Except for an occasional wary glance at Adair, Bogannon proceeded like a skilled surgeon. “Not a bad groove, Winters; no bone-fracture, I’d say. A slight brain-concussion, which should be gone by tomorrow.” He sponged easily, cleansing gash and adjacent scalp. Afterwards he applied ointment and a bandage. He took his time, gave Winters minutes in which to steady his mind, his body, and especially his gun-hand, which he might need at any moment. “There,” he announced at last and immediately poured Winters another drink.

Winters now held his own glass. Stimulated by Doc’s good wine, his mind cleared. But memory of his immediate past was filled with confusion, with horrifying scenes whose unnerving effect was on him still. His hands shook, were wet with sweat.

A few feet away stood Willie Adair, a queer look in his pale eyes—in his expression evidence of desperate inner struggle. Disturbance of dangerous import went on inside Winters, also. The pale-eyed face of Adair’s resembled another face—that of

one Ab Corfeld on whose head there was a price. Yet because of an uncontrollable shakiness in his hands and arms, Winters gave Adair benefit of any doubts he had. Now was not the time for a showdown.

Winters drained his glass and got up. "Thanks, Doc." He tossed down a quarter-eagle. "Give all my friends a drink; goodnight."

Adair swabbed his own wet face a moment after Winters had gone. "What was that deputy marshal doing here?"

"You have eyes, Adair," Bogannon replied.

"Sure. But he looked at me mighty queer-like."

"Think nothing of it, Adair." Bogie brought drinks and put them down at tables. He was not his usual friendly, philosophical self. Something was amiss in Forlorn Gap; just what, he could not say, but this Adair gave evidence of its existence.

Bogie did not drink with his guests, but returned to washing and polishing glasses. Seconds later his batwings swung inward. This time a tall stranger in a high-top hat came in, in his left hand a gold-headed cane.

And here was a character, thought Doc, if ever there was a character. He was dressed in black, a dark-skinned individual with black hair that hung thickly to his coat collar and rolled in a great brush behind each ear. His eyes were dark and hard, like those of an eagle. When he came up for a drink, Bogannon shivered; those terrible eyes made his whole inner life feel naked.

"What would you have?" Bogie asked nervously.

"A touch of wine, my good man."

Bogie supplied him at once. Cautiously, he said, "I don't recall a time when I've had such a distinguished-looking guest."

His glance at Bogannon was calculating, vaguely condescending, otherwise mysterious. "You are being gracious, sir." He sipped his wine until finished with it. "You," he said, "are known hereabouts as Doc Bogannon. I am known, and rightly, as Dr. Stoke Pogus. I bear no relation to a famous church of somewhat similar name, however."

Ah, thought Doc, here was a scholar whom he should like to know better. "You have in mind that old English church of Gray's 'Elegy.' A wonderful institution it must have been, to have inspired so grand a poem."

"At last I've met a kindred spirit," Dr. Stoke

Pogus murmured to himself.

Bogannon rambled on. "Now that I've heard your name, I do recall that you have opened a doctor's office in town. If reports are correct, you have, also, a thriving practice already."

"Reports are correct, my good man." Dr. Pogus allowed his glass to be refilled. "You, too, should drop in to see me. And soon, for my stay in your town will be brief."

Bogannon wanted to ask Pogus if he was from Boston, but his way of saying *my good man* suggested to Bogie that Pogus *was* from Boston; he decided not to ask.

"Perhaps I should drop in to see you, Doctor," he said offhand. "Not that I have any ailments that I know of, but a man can never tell what may be prowling in his system."

"You speak wisely," observed Pogus. He turned and glanced about with apparent casualness. His heavy eyebrows lifted. "Ah! My friend William Adair."

ADAIR had turned from his drinking-companions to stare peculiarly at Dr. Pogus. Bogannon was puzzled, a little frightened. In some strange way, he suspected, Pogus had Adair in his power. That suspicion was confirmed when Adair got up and, trance-like, followed Pogus out. Bogannon himself experienced a peculiar sensation—a tingling that ran up his arms to his shoulders. To rid himself of it he plunged into glass polishing and putting things in order generally for closing.

Dr. Pogus and his companion strolled by moonlight to one of those numerous deserted buildings where Pogus had appropriated space for an office. Inside, a lamp burned with a soft, greenish glow, and a man in a small beakless red cap arose respectfully. He was a springy sort, above medium height, muscles discernible through tight-fitting shirt and trousers. Expectancy marked his middle-aged, handsome face.

"Yes, master?" he said.

"What is your name?" Pogus asked him, as if rehearsing lines in a play.

"My name is Dudley Ettershank, sir."

"Well spoken," Pogus commented softly. "Now, to your work."

Ettershank sprang behind Adair and pinned his arms to his sides. Adair, though surprised, did not resist; he merely stared at Pogus, who indicated a

chair and gave a nod, construed by Ettershank as directing him to seat and bind Adair, which he promptly did, hand and foot.

Pogus placed a small table before Adair. Its top was vacant, yet Adair stared at it; perspiration wet his face.

"Oh-ho," said Pogus. "So you see my pet rattlesnake again. Now then, if you don't want him to stick his fangs in your face, you will tell me where your gold is hidden."

Adair shrank back. "I don't have no gold."

"Of course it was you who took twenty thousand in gold from that Pangborn Stage and made off with it; and it is hidden on Alkali Flat. How do I know you are a stage-robber? Because you came to me as a physician yesterday, with a shotgun-slug in your back. You also had alkali dust on your clothes, desert dirt on your shoes. Where is it, Adair?"

Adair, staring at an imaginary snake, sweated and tugged at his bonds. "I don't know. I'm not a robber; I've got no enemies. I'm everybody's friend. I didn't bury no gold."

Pogus nodded to Dud Ettershank. "Take his gun, Dudley. I shall remove his trance, change him back to Abner Corfeld, his real self. Perhaps then he will remember." He leaned forward and stroked Adair's temples gently and began in a soothing voice, "You are not William Adair. You are Abner Corfeld, stagecoach-robber and murderer. Remember? You are Abner Corfeld, a man with a price on his head. Do you understand me, Corfeld?"

He continued thus for some minutes. His captive began to stir, gradually blinked as if awakening from sleep. His personality changed. Where there had been terror, and formerly a friendly docility, now appeared a hard and ferocious face. Hands and feet jerked, and cruel lips snarled.

"What's going on here? Get these ropes off me."

"Abner Corfeld!" Dr. Pogus exclaimed in mock surprise. "What a piece of luck to have you in our hands. You would like to be released, no doubt? Very well, it is quite simple. Merely tell us where you hid your loot. Gold is our objective: twenty thousand dollars, taken by you in a recent stagecoach robbery."

"You swindler!" Corfeld raged. "I thought you was a doctor. You put a spell on me, but you didn't

find out anything, and you won't."

"Unfortunately for you, I didn't find out. But I intend to." He looked up, a sudden harsh determination in his dark eyes. "Dudley, a hot needle. Then hold out his thumb; they usually talk after one or two applications. Perhaps you should gag him temporarily, friend Dudley."

"Yes, master," responded Ettershank, bright with anticipation of seeing a man tortured. "It is a pleasure, master."

Ettershank was agile, muscular, quick and efficient, but he was not delicate; he forced a cloth roughly into Corfeld's mouth and tied it tight behind his head. On Dr. Pogus' table he placed a lighted candle and an assortment of harness needles, a small vise, two pairs of pincers. A few seconds later he grabbed one of Corfeld's thumbs, gripped it against a chair-arm and watched, fascinated, while Pogus inserted a hot needle under its dirty nail.

Corfeld writhed in agony. Sweat beaded on his face. With gag then removed, he promised weakly, "I'll tell you."

"Will you take us to it?" inquired Pogus, his expression quietly menacing.

Corfeld was sullen, but subdued. "I'll take you."

A short time later they were riding southward upon Alkali Flat.

DEPUTY Winters had found his wife waiting up for him, cook-stove hot and coffee simmering. They had a midnight supper together. Myra's initial alarm, caused by her husband's injury, had subsided. They had their final cups of coffee, then Myra remembered a matter of unusual interest.

"Lee, in a way you are lucky. There's a doctor in town, a Dr. Pogus; you should see him tomorrow and have him treat your wound."

Winters regarded his wife affectionately, but curiously. Myra was beautiful, slightly above medium height, slender, fair, with soft, dark hair and gentle blue eyes. It was time they preempted one of those fertile secluded valleys he had seen in his numerous manhunts, where they could settle, establish a ranch and raise a family. Being a deputy marshal was hard on his nerves—on hers, as well. Moreover, some quick-draw gunman could any day put an end to all of their dreams.

His curiosity increased to uneasiness. "Dr. Pogus?"

“Yes.”

“Have you been to see him?”

Myra smiled. “Of course not, Lee. I’ve never been sick a day in my life, so far as I know.”

Uneasiness was changing to anger. “Who *has* been to see this Dr. Pogus?”

“Oh, I suppose almost everyone except one. A good thing he’s here, too, for almost everyone is sick. I guess they never realized how much they needed a doctor until one showed up. But what is bothering you, Lee? Do you know something about him?”

“I’m at least curious about him,” Winters said shortly. “What is his full name?”

“Dr. Stoke Pogus. He has an assistant, too, whose name is Ettershank.”

“Dudley Ettershank?”

“Why, yes.” Myra sensed trouble. “Now, don’t tell me there’s a price on their heads?”

Winters was not sure as to price, but information in his office suggested there ought to be ropes around their necks. “They’re a proper couple to stay away from.”

It was Myra’s turn to reflect. There was, indeed, something odd in recent events. People who had not been sick at all were now complaining of dreadful ailments. “Lee,” she said uneasily, “you will take your own advice and stay away from them, won’t you?”

“As a patient, yes; as a deputy marshal, maybe.”

“But, Lee—” Myra withheld her entreaty. “Of course, Lee.”

WINTERS slept late, but immediately after breakfast he saddled Cannon Ball for a leisurely ride to his office.

In front of Pepper Neal’s store, Forlorn Gap’s loafing-place, when there was loafing to be done, he found a collection of gold-diggers. Their appearance there on a workday indicated trouble. Some reclined on Neal’s store porch; a few sat in slumped positions; others stood with hands on posts for support.

They nodded listlessly as Winters pulled up. “Mornin’, Winters,” said two or three.

“Have you men quit your diggin’s?” asked Winters.

A big miner with a sad face looked up at him. “We’re sick, Winters.”

Winters grunted his disgust. “You men are as healthy as bears. What’s got into you?” He looked straight at gold-digger Jim Evarts.

Evarts put a hand on his face. “See that swellin’? That cheekbone, left side of my face, aches fit to kill.”

There could have been a slight swelling; Winters wasn’t sure. He looked at big Moss Tyner, who had a claim in Fudge Around Gulch. “What ails you, Moss?”

Tyner shook his shaggy head. “Winters, something crawls in my stomach. That Dr. Pogus says it’s a horned toad. I must’ve et a toad egg, he says, and it hatched in my stomach; it’s livin’ off of what I eat.”

“How long have you been feeling it?” asked Winters.

“Off and on for years, I reckon. But since Pogus told me what it is, I feel it a heap worse.”

A healthy, carefree digger with a pick on his shoulder grinned up at Winters. “Don’t look at me, Winters; I’m as sound as a nugget.”

“Have you been to see Dr. Pogus?”

“You bet. But he couldn’t talk me into being sick. In my opinion, that doctor’s name ought to be Bogus Pogus, instead of Stoke Pogus.”

“All of you men sick?” asked Winters.

“All except Pilbrow there,” said Tyner.

“Pilbrow is sick, too,” said digger Kain Leffingwell. “He just don’t know it. Disease creeps up on a man. I never dreamed I had an abscess on my liver till Doc Pogus told me. It crope up on me, he said, and it’s there all right; big as that.” Leffingwell exhibited his huge, rusty fist, shook his head gloomily. “You may have one yourself, Winters. Pogus says it shows in a man’s face, makes him look sad and puzzled; you’ve got a face like that yourself, Winters.”

Winters puckered his face gloomily. “Where does this Pogus have his office?”

“Down in that old Mercer building, other side of Goodlett Hotel. He won’t be there this early, though.”

Winters lifted bridle rein and gighed his horse gently.

HIS INTENTION to see Dr. Pogus had to be postponed. There was a letter at his office from Marshal Hugo Landers at Brazerville. It sent Winters on a long ride through Wild Cat Gulch to Hoodoo, a pocket-sized mining camp on Snake Creek. Upon his return, shortly before midnight, he stopped for a drink at Bogannon’s saloon.

Bogie was at a table in an attitude of rapt

attention, while a stranger talked beguilingly to him over glasses of untouched wine. Bogie did not look up with his usual glad greeting. He did not look up at all.

Winters hurried to him and dug fingers sharply into his shoulder. "Doc, a little service."

Bogie looked around, startled. His expression slowly changed from a blank stare to one of recognition. "Winters!" He got up quickly and wiped sweat from his forehead. "Sit down, Winters, while I fetch a glass." As Winters eased into a chair, he added politely, "Winters, meet my good friend Dr. Stoke Pogus."

Winters nodded but did not offer to shake hands; he disliked to handshake a bozo he might later have to shoot. Pogus did not even nod.

Bogannon walked away unsteadily. He poured himself a stiff whiskey and tossed it down his throat. He came back wiping his mouth and put down a third glass.

Winters held an eye on Bogie's trembling hand and a rising flood of red in his wine glass. "Doc, your good friend Pogus reminds me of a feller down on Trinity River when I was a button in Texas. An undertaker, he was. When he looked at you, he seemed to wonder how long it would be before you changed to a corpse. Nothing distressed him so much as seeing people in good health."

Dr. Pogus maintained a cold, eagle-eyed demeanor. There was sinister reproof in his voice. "Bogannon, I fear your friend lacks somewhat of life's little amenities."

Bogie was loyally apologetic. "Winters is a man of war, Doctor; social graces seldom attend such fighting men as he."

Pogus fixed his strange eyes on Winters. "His kind of war is having its effect, too, I perceive." He glanced at Winters' bandaged head.

Winters removed his hat to give Pogus a better look. "You're not a bit off there, Pogus. Not only do I get my hair parted; it's beginning to tell on my nerves."

Pogus nodded slowly. "Possibly you would like to come with me to my office?"

"I was thinking of doing that very thing tomorrow."

"Tonight will be your last chance; tomorrow I am due in Elkhorn Pass."

Bogannon shook off a remnant of odd feeling. "Winters, do you no longer trust my own healing art?"

Pogus' eyes glinted icily. "Bogannon, perhaps I should pay *you* another call before I leave for Elkhorn? Or is it merely a case of professional jealousy that afflicts you?"

"Doc," said Winters, "you have given me good care heretofore, but I think I should go with Dr. Pogus. My ailment is different from what you think."

Pogus shoved back his chair and arose. "Tonight is your last chance, Winters."

Winters sprang up. "Then I'm with you."

"But, Winters!" exclaimed Bogie, rising uneasily. "You are hurting my pride. Besides, you don't realize what you're doing."

Winters replied brusquely, "Doc, when it comes to my personal affairs, I think I can trust my own judgment."

"Of course, Winters." Bogannon was bitter. "I trust it will be your own judgment you rely on."

Winters and Pogus left hurriedly.

FORLORN GAP had settled to its customary midnight quiet but, contrary to custom, lights burned in most of its few occupied dwellings.

"Something has happened to this town," observed Winters. "Why are people up so late?"

"I wonder," replied Dr. Pogus. "Possibly it is illness; in fact, I happen to know there is an epidemic of strange diseases here."

"You are no doubt getting rich as a result?"

"I am not one to commercialize too heavily upon my healing arts."

They passed Goodlett Hotel, whose light burned with a mellow glow. Inside, recent arrivals by stagecoach were being registered and assigned to rooms. Fifty yards beyond Goodlett a greenish light escaped through shutters of a weather-beaten, deserted store building.

Pogus slowed his steps and touched Winters' left arm. "Perhaps I should warn you, Winters, that you are about to enter a place where dwell powers you are not accustomed to meet. Healing is not purely a physical phenomenon; indeed, it is largely spiritual. Certainly it depends much upon a person's state of mind. To be healed, one must believe; one must surrender himself to his benefactor's healing touch; one must obey."

Pogus continued in a soft, beguiling, disarming voice until they stood before a closed door. Pogus knocked three times gently, once sharply, twice at measured distance. After a moment's delay they

were admitted, Pogus before, Winters following cautiously, hand close to gun.

Their doorkeeper was a man in a small round cap, a handsome individual who moved with catlike ease and silence, muscular, quick, his eyes strangely following Pogus, alert, expectant.

"My assistant," said Pogus. "His name is Dudley Ettershank. Dudley, place a chair for Officer Winters."

"Yes, master."

Winters turned as Ettershank was about to pass behind him. He expected an attack, but there was none. Ettershank merely placed an armchair beside a small table. But Winters had recognized that rich, obliging voice. It belonged to a man in a little round cap, seen by moonlight on Alkali Flat. Winters remembered it vaguely, like a meaningless dream.

"Be seated, Winters," said Pogus. When Winters had sat down, Pogus did likewise. "Now then, my patient, if you will fix your attention upon my eyes and obey my instructions, I shall perform upon you a miracle of healing. Are you ready?"

Winters glanced over his shoulder. Dud Ettershank had posted himself directly behind Winters. In one hand he held a short rope. Winters frowned. "I never like to have one man at my back, while another in front wants my undivided attention."

"Dudley," said Pogus, "you will move to one side. I fear my patient is not of sufficiently susceptible mind to be healed."

"I understand, master."

Winters had been looking over his right shoulder. Ettershank moved toward his left, but before Dud was completely out of sight, Winters glimpsed a swift movement of hands. He shoved himself back, and his chair collided with a charging body. A rope descended before his eyes and caught his throat. Winters drew his six-gun, whipped it backward and fired desperately. That terrible rope that had cut into his throat, relaxed.

Dud Ettershank clawed at his side. His eyes gleamed insanely; he came at Winters with a long knife. Winters, breath regained, fired at a spot on Dud Ettershank's forehead. Dud's body dropped solidly.

All that happened within a second—too fast for

Pogus to intervene. But his right hand was under his coat as Winters turned.

"Don't try it, Pogus." Winters cocked his gun. "You are sure to die, Pogus, unless you lift your hands."

IN HIS SALOON, Doc Bogannon waited and sweated. Gunshots had intensified his worry. He had tried to warn Winters of his peril, but always it had seemed that when Winters most needed advice he was least receptive to it. Dr. Stoke Pogus undoubtedly was a mesmerizer—Bogannon himself had almost fallen under his spell. Thoughts of it gave him shudders.

He had got up to pour himself a drink of whiskey, when his batwings swung in. "Pogus!" he cried. His heart almost stopped. But then behind Pogus came Winters, six-gun in hand. "Winters!" Doc sank weakly into a chair. "Winters, I think you scared me like that on purpose."

"Maybe you think I'm not scared," said Winters. "Doc, kindly place a chair for Dr. Pogus."

They seated their distinguished prisoner. Pogus appeared quite indifferent to his fate.

"What happened, Winters?" asked Bogie.

Winters had brought along a small kit. It contained a small thumb-buster, harness-needles, knives, short ropes, candles, bottles, and nippers. "I hate to think what has been happening to some of his patients, Doc."

Bogie stared in horror. "You mean torture?"

"Torture," breathed Bogie, aghast.

"Fetch wine, Doc, and I'll tell you about it."

When they had imbibed together and Winters had told his story, Bogie arched eyebrows at Pogus. "Professional jealousy, eh?" Bogie's face assumed aspects of righteous judgment. "Winters, why didn't you shoot him?"

"Because," said Winters, "he's got a job to do. For instance, there's a man in town who thinks he's got a live horned toad in his stomach. Dr. Pogus will know how to remove that imaginary toad." He indicated Pogus' kit of tools. "If he needs persuasion, Doc, there are gold-diggers around who'd be glad to give it."

