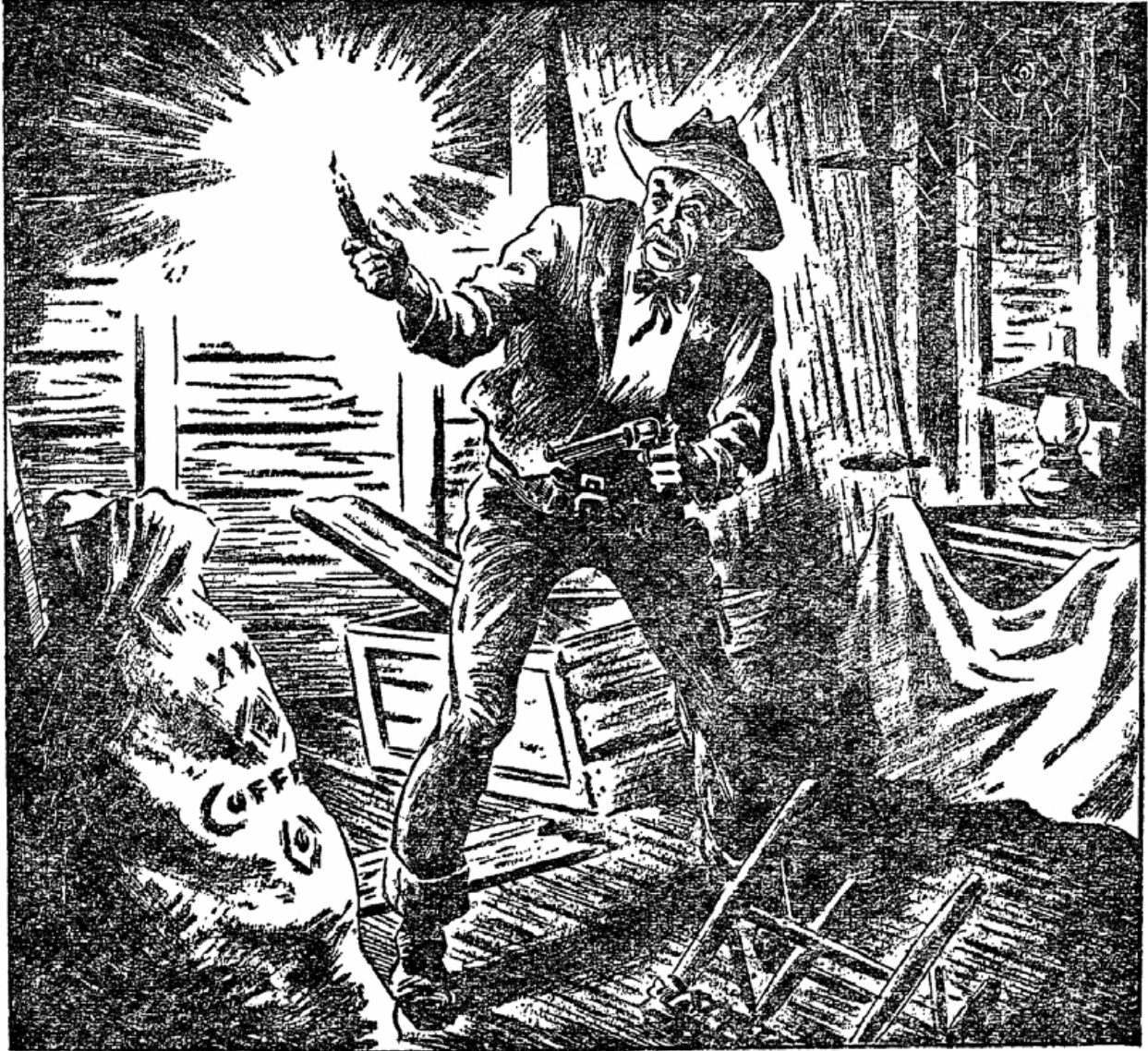


Doc Bogannon looked at the two monkeys seated at his tables, and wondered what breed they were. Winters, as usual, had kept a wary eye on them. But there remained the disconcerting fact that the man this pair had gone off with, the previous night, was now reported missing—and so was Lee Winters!

A PORTION TO SEVEN

LEE WINTERS STORY

BY LON WILLIAMS



Winters' eye fell upon the bulging sack, and he knew . . .

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters rode by moonlight toward Forlorn Gap from what he called his blue-monkey hunt through mining camps off Pangborn Road. Marshal Hugo Landers at Brazerville had written that two nameless wanted apes were thought to be at large, somewhere within twenty miles of Forlorn Gap. He

had intimated that Winters might find them if he looked hard enough. As they were worth one thousand dollars apiece, dead or alive, Winters had been looking. *Medium size, Landers had written. Queer ducks. Sandy to dark hair. Eyes blue, or blue-gray. Dangerous.* Winters, in view of that description, figured he might as well quit looking—

most badmen were of medium size, had blue, or blue-gray eyes, were queer and dangerous. Mention of a wart, or the like, would have been more helpful.

His road into town led through an outer fringe of deserted shacks, and alongside an open flat, or park. Children of miners now gone, had romped there in daylight hours. Easterners had called it Ragtag Common. At one side it had a community dug-well; its sweep, minus rope and bucket, still pointed like a dead finger, skyward.

Winters' horse, Cannon Ball, had never liked this place. By day, it had been noisy and odorous; at night, haunted by owls and varmints. And now, by bright moonlight, he moved skittishly, ready to jump out of his hide at any untoward sound or shadow. Winters, too, was jittery, ready for anything to happen.

Excuse for violent action was not long delayed. Midway of Ragtag Common, one huge, disconsolate dog propped himself on his haunches, pointed his nose straight up and howled, "Ow-wooooooo-oo!"

Cannon Ball stiff-legged himself; his four hoofs plowed sand. Immediately thereafter he walked briefly on his hind legs, made several head-slinging jumps, climaxed his misconduct by his habitual, inevitable one-horse stampede. Winters, as usual, in such situations, could do nothing but hold on. That he did with sympathetic ferocity, while Cannon Ball, bridle-bit clamped tight in his teeth, thundered, snorting, down Pangborn Road.

IN FORLORN GAP'S only surviving saloon, Doc Bogannon, owner and operator, was busy tidying up for closing. Only a half-hour was left before midnight; except for five or six travelers who were just leaving, only three customers remained.

Two of those sat up front and played cards. Bogannon took casual note of them while he washed and dried glasses. They wore gray caps, exactly alike. Both were in baggy, frayed black suits and dirty, white shirts; their sandy-to-dark hair had certainly not been cut for many months. Both were smoothly shaved; both had saintly looks in their bright blue, or blue-gray eyes.

They played what Doc Bogannon considered draw poker. When one had lost all, they divided up their money and began again.

"Your draw," one said politely.

"I believe it is your draw," his companion gently protested.

"No, I think it is your draw."

"No, sir, I am most confident it is your draw."

Bogannon dried several glasses and observed that those two queer ducks still argued courteously as to whose draw it was, each concerned not with his own, but with his neighbor's rights. Bogie regarded this solicitous procedure, however, as nothing extraordinary. Indeed, nothing was to be regarded as extraordinary in this semi-ghost town, either as to freak of nature or strangeness of human behavior. From those tumultuous, barbarous tides of humanity that flowed in torrents into nearby gold-fields, great numbers of oddities sifted out to lodge in wayside towns, as inexplicable in this behavior as formation of sandbars by pounding rivers. There were Napoleons among them, who followed their stars of destiny; Caesars who had crossed their Rubicons; Alexanders who wept because they had no more worlds to conquer. There were also guileless creatures in wolf-skins; voracious tigers in coats of lambs; men in great hurry who nevertheless lingered; and leisurely characters who departed in haste. Nothing surprised Bogannon.

Yet among all those sojourning strangers, occasionally one caused him momentary uneasiness. His third remaining guest was of that class; that staring hanger-on had kept an eye on Bogannon all evening. He now rose and came forward, his small felt hat and neat brown suit adding businesslike qualities to his round, smooth face.

He came up and laid an arm on Bogie's bar. In his hand was a small, framed photograph. He flipped it over, meantime watched Bogannon's expression. "Know who that is?" he asked coldly.

Bogannon stared at what might have been his own likeness, ten years earlier; instantly he was chilled and shaken. But while inward turmoil raged, his face assumed lines and shades of indifference. "I have no idea who that could be," he said with superficial composure.

His interrogator presented his brass badge of authority. Its inscription was in black. *Winkerton Detective Agency, Boston, Massachusetts*. "I," its owner announced importantly, "am J. Watt Wooten, Special Agent."

Bogannon fought his inner tumult. He said suavely, "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Wooten."

Bogie extended his big right hand and squeezed Wooten's smaller one.

"Ouch! You don't have to do that," Wooten screamed.

"Oh, so sorry," Bogie apologized. He wrinkled his forehead and continued, "I've heard much concerning Boston, from this person and that who ought to know; Boston must be quite something."

Wooten massaged his suffering hand. "That's neither here nor there," he said indignantly. "I just happen to be looking for somebody who used to live there. My employers are insurance companies, who will have to pay life insurance to his wife, or widow, if he isn't found before her lawsuit comes up for hearing in New England this fall."

"Ah," said Bogie, his emotions under stern control at last, "that's right interesting; who is this person you're looking for?"

"Bullington," J. Watt Wooten replied sharply. His greenish eyes fixed themselves upon Bogie's features, observed every line and movement. "Winthrop Bullington."

BOGANNON feigned curiosity, in order to conceal those more disturbing emotions that sought to betray him. "Winthrop Bullington," he mused. "Hmm! That Winthrop part sounds Bostonian enough. But Bullington? That rings discordantly, somehow; are there also Boston Bullingtons?"

"Winthrop Bullington was Boston all right," Detective Wooten observed haughtily. "Few richer, or more prominent men in all New England than he. Carried one hundred thousand in life insurance in favor of his wife. Rather surprisingly, she has kept all premiums paid; now, after more than seven years of absence, and being unheard of, or from, he is in law presumed dead. Unless he is found alive, and very soon, his insurance will have to be paid. It will mean ten thousand dollars to me, personally, if I find him." Wooten looked up at Bogie, his eyes narrowed to threatening chinks. "And," he added with ruthless assurance, "at last I have found him."

Bogie arched his black eyebrows. "Not really!"

Then, as if timed by kindly fate, his batwings swung inward. Simultaneously tall, lean, middle-aged, dark-mustached Deputy Marshal Winters strode in. "Winters!" Bogie exclaimed joyously. "Come in, Winters."

Winters' expression was grim. He tramped up and slapped down a coin. "Wine, Doc."

"Winters, am I glad to see you!" said Bogie. He poured wine, but used both hands to keep his grip steady. "You look pale, Winters; seen a ghost?"

Winters lifted his glass and drank. His own hand was shaky. "Don't mention ghosts to me, Doc, or I'll get to believing in 'em." Meanwhile his eyes roved corner-wise and rested upon J. Watt Wooten. "Who's he, Doc?"

"Oh, pardon," said Bogie. "Mr. Wooten, this is Deputy Marshal Lee Winters. Winters, J. Watt Wooten, from Boston."

Wooten looked along his nose disdainfully. "How do you, my good man?"

"Only tolerable, suh," said Winters. He did not offer to shake hands; he disliked Wooten instinctively. Moreover, from habit, he avoided shaking hands with strangers he might later have to shoot. He put down his glass and backhanded his mustache. "What does J. Watt Wooten want, Doc?"

Bogannon leaned back and folded his arms. His tenseness had relaxed. In repose Bogie was broad, tall, genteel, and intellectual.

He chuckled gently. "Wooten wants to know where he can find his man, one Winthrop Bullington, from Boston."

"From Boston, eh?"

"Yes, sir," declared Bogie. "From Boston. Insurance companies want to find this man Bullington, so they won't have to pay his life insurance. A man is presumed dead, you know, after so long."

Winters leaned back, with elbows on Bogie's shiny bar. "Reminds me of that feller who visited Trinity Valley in my button days down in Texas, Doc," he began dryly. "His name had been Euclid Porterhouse, and everybody called him Beefsteak. He didn't like being called Beefsteak, so he had his name changed from Euclid Porterhouse to Cleve Porter. Years later one Gamaliel Porterhouse died in New Orleans and left millions, so 'twas said. His only heir was his nephew, one Euclid Porterhouse, whose whereabouts had become unknown. This here Cleve Porter, who'd turned private detective, started out to find Euclid Porterhouse. He was sort of forgetful, Cleve was; he searched twenty years before he realized he was lookin' for hisself."

Bogie arched one eyebrow at J. Watt Wooten. "Imagine that!"

Wooten's face had tightened. Its lines proclaimed his extreme contempt for Lee Winters. By way of emphasizing his disdain, he tilted his

head back and looked again along his nose. "I've known other men who tried to be funny; they never were."

Winters put down another coin. "Doc, give J. Watt Wooten whatever he wants, with my compliments." He turned to leave.

His dark, cold eyes fell upon two queer ducks who sat at a card table and stared benignly at their cards.

One said, "It is your draw."

His companion responded politely, "No, it is your draw."

So unnerved and angered Winters had been by his rough ride into town, and so distracted from business by his encounter with Wooten, that he gave those two queer ones but a single passing thought. Never before had he seen two humans who looked so harmless.

"Goodnight, Doc," he said, and abruptly departed.

BOGANNON, once more master in his own house, looked down his nose at J. Watt. "What will you have, Mr. Wooten?"

Wooten was in ill and angry humor. "I can buy my own drinks, thank you."

Bogie washed Winters' glass and dried it. In turning to his back shelf, he observed the two card players again. They were staring at Wooten. They glanced at Bogannon, then again stared at Wooten.

One of them said, "Will he do?"

His companion nodded. "I think he will do."

Both nodded. One said, "We both think so, but possibly we should ask him."

One got up and approached Wooten. "Pardon me, sir, but may I ask you something?"

Wooten's contempt for Deputy Winters had carried over; he now bestowed it upon this odd-looking character. "All right, my good man, what do you want to know?"

"Oh—uh, nothing, sir."

Wooten's questioner returned to his companion, shook his head sadly. "He won't do."

"No, he won't do."

"That's very disappointing; perhaps we should both ask him?"

"Perhaps so."

This was getting to be interesting. Bogannon leaned over his bar, observed and listened.

His queer card players got up and came forward quietly. One of them said to J. Watt Wooten,

"Pardon us, sir, but we should like to introduce ourselves."

"Suit yourselves," Wooten responded curtly.

"I," said one, "am called Straight Gate."

"And I," said his companion, "am known as Narrow Gate."

Wooten's nostrils spread in scorn. "You don't say!"

Bogannon was of similar mind, but he held his peace.

Straight and Narrow Gate nodded to each other and went off for consultation. Straight Gate was gloomy. He shook his head emphatically. "My brother, he won't do."

Narrow Gate was less pessimistic. "I think possibly he will do."

"Do you think so?"

"I am inclined to think so."

"No," Straight insisted gently, "he won't do."

"Perhaps we should ask him again," said Narrow. "Do you mind?"

Straight reflected, nodded. "All right, we shall ask him again."

Bogannon had a creepy feeling as they came forward again. His lips puckered of their own accord.

They approached, and Narrow gave Wooten an eye-to-eye inquisition. "Sir," he asked soberly, "would you give a portion to seven?"

Wooten started, then swung upon Doc Bogannon. "Say! Who are these lunatics?"

Bogie glanced at Wooten, his expression haughty. "As you Bostonians would say, they are Messrs. Straight and Narrow Gate."

Wooten scowled at Bogie. "I fear your sense of humor is somewhat grotesque."

Straight and Narrow Gate retired for further consultation.

"Now, will he do?" asked Narrow.

Straight Gate shook his head vigorously. "I don't think he will do. Indeed, I'm sure he won't. He did not answer our question."

Narrow Gate shrugged resignedly. "Then let us resume our game."

They sat down, divided their money into equal shares and resumed their play.

Wooten furrowed his brow at length. Then he addressed Bogannon brightly. "See here, Bogannon; I've got something to offer you."

Bogie straightened and cast about for something to do. "I wouldn't be interested," he said coldly. He

looked at his watch. "Besides, it is closing time."

"Hear me one minute," Wooten urged. He dropped his voice. "You and I can make five thousand dollars apiece, just like that." He held up his right hand and snapped his finger. "I'm looking for Winthrop Bullington. If he were alive, he'd be as like you as your identical twin, if you had an identical twin."

"Not interested," said Bogie in more positive tone. He pulled down his bar lamp and blew out its flame.

"Mighty easy money," urged Wooten. "You'd only have to impersonate Winthrop Bullington for three or four months."

"My answer is no," Bogie announced with finality.

THERE WAS a tug at Wooten's sleeve. Wooten flushed impatiently and swung round to face Straight and Narrow Gate. "Pardon us," said Straight, "but we should like to repeat our question. Would you give a portion to seven?"

Bogannon laughed heartily. "Of course he would."

Straight and Narrow smiled their pleasure. "Thank you so much, Mr. Bogannon," said Straight. He faced Wooten again, and with much gravity. "Would you also give a portion to eight?"

"He would, indeed," exclaimed Bogie.

"Ah!" breathed Straight and Narrow.

Straight said with assurance, "Then we have great news for Mr. Wooten; we know where he is."

Wooten's eyes opened wide. "Where who is?"

Narrow lifted his chin proudly. "This man you are looking for."

Wooten was excited. "You mean Winthrop Bullington?"

Straight and Narrow nodded to each other. "We know where he lives, don't we?" said Straight.

"That we do," said Narrow.

"Then tell me!" shouted Wooten.

Straight looked at Narrow. Straight said, "He would give a portion to seven."

Narrow nodded. "As he would give a portion to seven, so shall we tell him."

"Then tell me," shouted Wooten; "show me where."

Straight nodded at Wooten. "We said we would tell you."

Narrow nodded. "Likewise, we shall show you."

"Come on then," cried Wooten. "Get going."

Straight and Narrow nodded to each other once more and hurriedly departed, Wooten racing after them.

Bogie wiped his face, sighed deeply, and extinguished his lights. Possibly he was a queer one himself, he thought. Here he was, in a haunt of lunatics and ghosts, living with a half-breed Shoshone wife, when he could have been living like a prince in some Eastern city. Like a prince? He grunted in disgust. Thoughts of his amorous, faithful Shoshone reminded him that he was living like a king where he was. His homeward footsteps quickened.

Meanwhile J. Watt Wooten eagerly followed his guides into moonlit Pangborn Road; then through blocks of deserted houses and shacks; thence to one less-abandoned cottage beside Ragtag Common.

There Straight Gate fingered his lips. "Shhh!" he whispered. "He lives here."

"He sleeps soundly," said Narrow Gate.

"But squeaking door hinges might wake him," said Straight.

"Well, let it," declared Wooten.

They crept forward and Straight lifted a hand to let them in.

At that moment a terrifying sound arose. "*Ow-woooooo-oo! Oo-wool!*"

Wooten jumped and grabbed his hat.

"Shhhh!" whispered Narrow Gate. "That is his dog."

They huddled close, then Straight pressed forward again. Door hinges screeched noisily, and Straight disappeared through a dark opening.

Before Wooten could follow, something hard was laid along his head. He glimpsed streaks of fire, his knees bent. He dreamed of being dragged through open doorways and across endless creaking, rough-board floors.

Eerie, far-off voices argued politely as to whether he would or wouldn't do. It was decided finally that he would do, and immediately thereafter a wire was drawn tightly round his neck.

TWO MORNINGS later, across their breakfast of hot biscuits, steak, coffee, brown gravy, and honey, Deputy Winters contemplated his wife with unusual concern. By marrying a young widow, he had acquired a neat cottage, a mining claim, and a lovely companion. But, with marriage had come responsibilities, too. Men who lived alone had no worries as to earthly events beyond their own short

lives; men who married could leave widows—orphans, too, sometimes. That truth worried Winters, disturbed his sleep, gnawed constantly at his troubled mind.

“Myra,” he said gravely, “we ought to grab us some land.”

Myra Winters looked up hopefully, but then her face clouded. This had been talked of before—many times—and nothing had come of it. She nodded understandingly, nevertheless. “Yes, Lee, we ought.”

“I know where there’s spring water and no less than two hundred acres of rich, flat land close by. It’s ten miles up Elkhorn Road and off north about two miles. Let’s go out and look around; we might even start work on our cabin.”

Myra’s blue eyes grew wide and bright. “You mean, you might give up being an officer?”

“That idea grows bigger every day.”

“Well, then!”

They hurried through breakfast. While Myra packed grub, Winters went for their horses. He had acquired a magnificent star-faced bay for Myra; and, to his surprise and satisfaction, she proved to be an excellent rider. From his growing collection of weapons—involuntary donations from captured or slain desperadoes—he had given her, first a six-gun, then a rifle, and had taught her proficiency in their use. “When we settle down to ranching,” he had explained, “you may need to stand off some renegades all by yourself. Effective guns talk big, you know.”

“Yes,” she had agreed, happy with thoughts of getting settled. “When shall we begin this ranch life?”

“Any day; soon as a good quittin’-place shows up.”

As yet, no good quitting-place had presented itself.

Well-armed and provisioned, they were mounted and ready to ride, when a woman came running in their direction. Myra’s joyous spirit sank.

“There’s Samantha Creekland.” In Myra’s voice were both sympathy and disappointment. “And she’s in trouble; I can just tell.”

Winters tightened bridle leather. “Her trouble can wait. We’ve got our own problems; let’s go.”

“No, Lee; we must see what she wants.”

Samantha Creekland’s steps lagged from weariness. “Officer Winters, I want you to look for

my husband. He didn’t come home last night; I’m afraid something awful has happened to him.”

“That’s too bad,” said Winters dustily.

Samantha came panting on. She was slim, bedraggled and about forty, wife of miner Jake Creekland, who gambled with his gold—in consequence was sometimes rich, but oftener poor.

“Winters, you can’t ride off like this,” Samantha declared reproachfully, “what with Jake not comin’ home. I want you to find him.”

Lee was vexed and disturbed. “Had he ever stayed out before?”

“Never,” panted Samantha. “Of course, he’s come home late sometimes, but he’s never failed to come at all.”

Winters glanced at Myra, perceived disappointment which she sought valiantly to conceal. He turned to Mrs. Creekland. “Samantha, you run on home. If Jake’s still on his feet, he’ll drift in; meantime, I’ll keep an eye out for him.”

“Thank you, Winters. I knowed you’d help.” Samantha Creekland gave him a grateful look and trudged wearily off.

Myra sighed. “Well, one never knows.” She started to dismount.

Winters restrained her. “Hold it, Myra. There’s nothing to keep us from looking, as we ride along; no telling where he is, anyhow.”

“You mean we’re still going?”

Winters was determined not to disappoint his wife this time. “That’s what I mean. Whatever kept Jake from coming home can’t be mended now.”

“You mean he may be dead?”

“That’s my guess.” Winters lifted Cannon Ball’s reins. “But we’ll look.”

THEY CANTERED onto Elkhorn Road and two hours later had staked their horses to graze near a spring in their beautiful cliff-rimmed valley. Winters and Myra stretched themselves to rest upon short, thick grass, face-up to cloudless sky, each conscious of peace, also of what loneliness there would be, if they did not have each other.

Suddenly, and without awareness that his thoughts had strayed, Winters said, “Myra, what makes dogs howl at night?”

Myra’s was an uneasy silence. She said at last, “Lee, you’re wondering about Jake Creekland, aren’t you?”

He sat up, then sprang to his feet. “Come on, Myra; let’s stake out our cabin.”

He gave her his hand, drew her up and led her to an elevated spot nearby. At its back, on plunging mountainsides, were numberless pines. With such building material at hand, their problem was half-solved already.

They gathered stones and outlined not merely a cabin, but also what might in time become their spacious ranch-house home. That done, they spread their lunch. "How wonderful it would be," said Myra wistfully, "if this would only come true. But we're dreaming idly, I fear."

"Why be so gloomy?" Lee chided.

"Because," she said forlornly, "you have your job; it's a job without end. Even while we laid out our house plan, you were thinking of Jake Creekland and howling dogs, of lonely rides, ghosts and gun-monkeys."

Winters studied her uncertainly. Myra worried, of course, but she had never before complained, never tried to change his way of making their living. But she was right; it was time they settled down. "I don't like being what I am," he said slowly. "If we could settle down, assured we wouldn't be bothered, we'd begin today. But when there's so many lawless dogs rovin' around, I reckon somebody's got to shoot 'em."

Myra smiled agreeably. "Of course, Lee. Anyhow, it's nice to dream about ranching. When you're through shooting lawless dogs— Well, there's plenty of time."

Both were silent as they rode out of their valley. They might return; they might not.

At their cottage in Forlorn Gap an hour before sundown, they found Samantha Creekland sitting on their doorstep. "Did you find my husband?" Samantha inquired fretfully.

"Not yet," said Winters; "I'm still lookin', though."

He and Myra swung down.

"Poor thing," said Myra, understanding from Samantha's sorrow why Winters felt it his duty to go on being a deputy-marshal. "Samantha, come in and let me fix you some coffee."

"I'd be pleased to," Samantha responded. "I'm so distraught, I'm near crazy."

Winters returned Myra's horse to its corral, told Myra goodbye, swung onto Cannon Ball again, and rode to Doc Bogannon's saloon.

Trade at Bogannon's had not yet commenced its evening rush. Bogie and Winters accordingly sat at a table and talked. "Doc," Winters asked finally,

"have you seen Jake Creekland lately?"

Bogie reflected, nodded. "He was here last night. And, last I noticed, his luck was running high."

Winters regarded that as portentous. "Did you see him leave?"

Bogie reflected for a while. "No, Winters; don't recall that I did. Why?"

Winters backhanded his mustache and got up. "Jake didn't go home; his wife's uneasy."

Winters left Bogannon in a study and went out.

Then Bogie remembered, and ran after him. "Winters, wait!" But Winters was gone.

WITHOUT having any place in mind, Winters had swung aboard his horse and started home. Then he'd remembered that dog he'd seen and heard on Ragtag Common. Why, he'd asked Myra, did dogs howl at night? Well, why did they?

Remembering his recent wild ride from that lonely spot, Winters wiped sweat, and swore privately that he'd never set foot there again. Yet, it was to there he rode. Having set out to find Jake Creekland's body, why not look where it would most likely be?

He hitched Cannon Ball before an uninhabited cottage and proceeded on nervous feet. Dusk had settled, and windowless houses, lonely and depressing by day, became spectral and frightening in night's weird, falling gloom.

Winters stopped and sank out of sight, as hinges screeched close ahead. He heard voices, too, and immediately two ghostly figures emerged. Hinges screeched behind them as they closed their door, and within seconds they were gone, headed toward that part of Forlorn Gap that was still alive.

After two or three minutes of sweaty indecision, Winters crept to that same screechy door and slowly shoved it open. Simultaneously arose that mournful howl he'd heard two nights before.

"Ow-woooooo-wool!"

Winters' right hand snapped down and his six-gun came up. For seconds he listened, made no further move. That chilling dog howl was repeated; but Winters decided it had no connection with him, even though it had scared him stiff. He wiped his face, stepped inside. Floorboards squeaked under his tread; a rat scurried; disagreeable odors hung like a cloud.

He waited again, listened, closed himself in and struck a match. Light disclosed oppressive

scenes—warped table, rickety chairs, bottles with half-burned candles in their mouths, cobwebs, scraps of food on unwashed plates. Winters lighted candles. Extended search revealed something yet more oppressive—a large coffee sack in a corner. As a sack it was grotesquely formed; it was its shape, and Winters' certainty of its contents, that made it a gruesome thing.

Candle in hand, Winters lifted an edge of its mouth and peered in. Fetid odors struck his nostrils. Though what he saw was what he had expected to find, he was shocked. "Jake Creekland!" he gasped.

Shortly before, he had seen Jake Creekland's murderers depart. What they looked like, he could not have guessed. Where they had gone, he did not undertake to surmise. Signs, however, indicated that they would return.

WINTERS sat down to wait. Waiting through long hours, he considered how he should proceed. He thought of extinguishing lights and waiting in black darkness; that corpse-haunted course he rejected at once as too distasteful. He considered waiting in another cottage, and bursting in upon them when they had returned; that course he dismissed as too risky. There were two of them, and he was not one to go gunning against odds.

His eyes rested upon Jake Creekland's gunnysack shroud, and he had an idea. "What could be more surprising to those killers," he thought, "than finding somebody alive where they'd left somebody dead?"

He lugged what remained of Jake Creekland outside, dumped those remains in back and returned with their late shroud. For practice, he got in and hunkered down—concealed himself easily.

He was there in darkness at midnight when voices again sounded, door hinges screeched, and dog howls again rose mournfully.

"What was that?" a strange voice inquired nervously.

"That's only our dog," another replied pleasantly.

Another, as agreeably, said, "He's only our faithful watchdog."

Footsteps scraped upon boards, a match was struck, candles lighted. "Say! This is no Indian museum. I've been tricked."

"Ah, now, we would not trick him, would we, Brother Narrow?"

"Of course not, Brother Straight."

"But you said you had Indian things here. I see none. I tell you—"

That indignant voice broke off suddenly. Iron had crashed upon bone; something fell heavily.

Winters caught his breath. Here was murder.

"Did you hit him hard, Brother Narrow?"

"I hit him quite hard, Brother Straight."

"Shall we take his money now and divide it?" said Straight.

"I think we should do so," said Narrow.

"Perhaps you should first put your strangler around his neck," said Straight.

"Yes, I think that would be a wise precaution," agreed Narrow.

Through light spaces between threads in his coffee sack, Winters glimpsed two moving forms. Sounds degenerated into search of pockets and later into clinks of coins upon wood. "A right good yield, wouldn't you say, Brother Narrow?"

"Indeed, yes, Brother Straight. When have we done better?"

There were again sounds of money being handled, and then Straight said, "Brother Narrow, we have yet one body undisposed of."

"And now we have two bodies to be disposed of," said Narrow.

"Would it exert you too much, if we disposed of one of them now?"

"Is there room in our old dug-well for one more?"

"I think there is room for one more."

"Then let us proceed."

As footsteps scraped toward him, Winters, cocked six-gun in hand, threw off his coffee-sack shroud, and rose to his knees. "There'll be room for two more," said he, leveling his gun at one of them, "unless you put your hands up pronto."

Straight and Narrow looked at each other, amazement on their pleasant countenances. "Brother Narrow, one of our corpses has come back to life."

"Then," said Narrow, "we shall have to kill him again."

They were quicker than Winters had anticipated; guns came from underarm holsters in lightning sweeps. Winters put his first slug through Straight's heart. He got one through his own hair before he could finish Narrow. Even then, he had to shoot twice where once should have been enough.

Winters got to his feet, holstered his smoking gun, stared at his victims. *Queer ducks*, eh? When

did they come any queerer?

IN HIS SALOON, Doc Bogannon sat alone at a table and suffered aches of conscience. He had not been as helpful to his good friend Winters as he should have been. Jake Creekland had left Bogannon's saloon with a couple of loonies who called themselves Straight and Narrow Gate. There had been another, also, two nights past. One J. Watt Wooten, too, had gone off with Straight and Narrow, and Wooten had not come back. In that particular, Doc felt thoroughly grateful, even though those loonies were wolves in lambskins. Yet he should have remembered better; he should have warned Winters against them.

Bogie's spirits lifted when hoof-beats pounded outside, followed soon by an inward swing of his batwings. "Winters!"

Bogie got up and hurried to fetch glasses and wine.

They sat down together, and Bogie filled two glasses.

"It's past midnight, Doc," said Winters, lifting his glass with tight, but steady fingers. "How come you don't go home?"

Bogie wiped his great forehead. "Winters, I figured you might drop by."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, Winters. My conscience was hurting me. After you'd been here early, inquiring about Jake Creekland, I should have remembered in time to tell you. I'm mighty sorry, too. No harm has been

done, I'm glad to see, though I've been feeling worse than spoiled oysters."

Winters arched his dark brows. "What's on your mind, Doc?"

"Winters, do you remember a dude named J. Watt Wooten?"

"Vaguely, yes."

"Well, two loonies tolled him off, to some rather final sort of place, I suspect. From my viewpoint, it was good riddance. But they also tolled Jake Creekland off, and tonight another. I'm afraid my gratitude for riddance of Wooten crippled my memory; I apologize, and trust you'll forgive me. But you should be careful of those loonies, Winters. I'm afraid they're dangerous. They call themselves Straight Gate and Narrow Gate."

Winters held his glass to be refilled. "Was that Watt Wooten feller an enemy of yours, Doc?"

Bogie nodded. "Don't hold it against me too much, but he was." There was a feelingless satisfaction in Bogie's voice that astonished his friend.

Winters fingered his mustache thoughtfully. Somewhere in his wanderings he'd heard mention of some principle called *balance of nature*. Maybe there was a place and a use for lawless dogs, after all. At least they ate one another.

