

LEE WINTERS STORY
by Lon Williams

Legend had it that Indians had turned a man into stone. Deputy Marshal Lee Winters, however, scoffed at such nonsense. Yet, whatever had happened to Danny Sobo—and that intense-looking stranger with whom he had left Bogannon's saloon, a night ago?

MYSTERY OF THE HOLLOW ROCK



D EPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters halted his horse Cannon Ball in a forking canyon five miles south of Elkhorn Road. From there, he had a choice of two routes homeward. A forbidding one was across spook-infested Alkali Flat; this was shorter by several miles. Its competitor led upward into a quiet, secluded valley, a country that long had beckoned to Winters as an unpreempted spot of rare promise.

He had seen that valley several times by day, never by night. In contemplation of his years of

retirement, he particularly thought of it as a place where he could rest his frayed, gun-weary nerves. In more imaginative moments, he saw it as an undeveloped paradise, a land of pastoral beauty, fruitful of happy years, good food, a family, peaceful and contented old age. This was night, but a full moon rode near its zenith, and this valley by moonlight, he thought, should be no less attractive than by day.

Cannon Ball, aware of his master's decision, swung northward. Then a strangeness set in. High

canyon walls echoed clinks and clatter of horseshoes upon stones as never before or elsewhere. At times they threw back such a furious mixture of sounds as to suggest intrusion of eerie cries, as if invisible alarmed birds were rising and flying away in screaming terror. Winters grew uneasy. He perspired and felt a chill upon his face; an alert tenseness permeated his legs, a readiness to clamp them tight against his horse's writhing, heaving sides.

Before midnight, canyon walls receded, and Winters' trail brought him onto a flat, open space where hoof beats made hardly a sound. Here was his valley. Yet it was not what he had expected it to be. Moonlight falling upon its wide expanse of level grass gave it a misty appearance, a suggestion, too, that unearthly creatures were in hiding hereabouts, had drawn over themselves a thick gray blanket. Its very stillness was ghostly.

Winters fought against fear. This was too good a place to be abandoned to spooks. Nevertheless, it was a place where spirits of lost ages might well have lingered. Along its western border, a clear stream meandered silently. Faint traces of ancient irrigation ditches were everywhere about. And jammed into a recess in its eastern cliffs lay tumbled ruins of what apparently had been an Indian fortress, or pueblo.

This ruin, he recalled from his wife's conversations, had been described by a French explorer and trapper named Jean Pateau as *La Maison Sans Vie*. Winters knew many Spanish words, but few French. Hence, if he had ever heard a translation, he had forgotten that *maison sans vie* meant *house without life*.

Determined to be practical, he looked upon *La Maison Sans Vie* as a prospective shelter for thousands of sheep, or, with some repair, for a lesser number of cattle and horses. That a civilized people had once occupied this valley he regarded as a certainty, though a fact of no present significance to him. He supposed its people had moved away, not that their fortress had been stormed by savages and their warriors and families slain. Myra Winters, who read everything she could lay her hands on, and listened to all manner of rumors and legends, had told him that Jean Pateau had a name for this valley. He had called it *Terre des Revenantes*. If she told him those words meant *land of ghosts*, he had forgotten that, too. Here, accordingly, was portent for which he was wholly unprepared.

Cannon Ball was first to sense a presence. He stopped so suddenly that Winters' saddle-post buried itself in its owner's stomach, punched out his wind. "Ugh!" Winters grunted. "What is it now?"

A sound came then from *La Maison Sans Vie*, a sad, weird moan; from an invisible room, a yellow light diffused itself into a corridor.

"Oh! Oh!" that moan repeated itself, in tone as that of one who had passed beyond pain into numb despair. "Oh, spirits, deliver me. Take from me these chains."

Then appeared a figure in a white robe, vaguely outlined by diffused light. Cannon Ball trembled and Winters shuddered; he could not have spoken, had he so wished. Slowly what they saw lifted its spectral hands, and a voice came forth in song. That voice was joined by others, and in a moment, a number—Winters was sure there were a thousand—of white-robed figures detached themselves from rocks about *La Maison Sans Vie* and slowly advanced toward him, all of them singing.

Cannon Ball reared, then leaped into violent forward motion. Winters, ready for whatever his horse might do, hung on, and this time Cannon Ball's hoofs made sounds as they pounded fast and hard. A canyon that provided a northern exit from *Terre des Revenantes* soon disgorged them onto Elkhorn Road. There, Cannon Ball turned eastward and Winters, relieved to be descending a familiar road to Forlorn Gap, took time to wipe his face and shake off a little of his fright.

But he did not go directly home to his wife; he needed a stimulant, as well as restoration of lost courage.

IN DOC BOGANNON'S saloon, only institution of its kind in town, the evening had been filled with excitement. In fact, it was still in progress. Center and cause of that excitement was a little man who stood in an open space in front of Bogie's bar and challenged all comers. His name was Danny Sobo.

Big, handsome Bogie, who had busied himself with serving drinks and washing and polishing glasses, at last leaned on his elbows and stared at Sobo. He frowned, perplexed. "Danny, how do you do it?"

Danny Sobo, presently bareheaded, his reddish hair tangled, grinned at Doc. "That's my secret."

A bearded, scowling gold-digger shook his head in disbelief. "It's a trick of some sort, I tell you."

Another grizzled miner stared at Sobo. "I got it figured; he's weighted down with all that gold he's won off of us suckers."

Doc's batwings squeaked and a man, lean, tough and sun-baked, shoved in.

"Winters!" exclaimed Bogannon.

Winters came straight to Bogie's bar and planked down a coin. "Wine, Doc. A big one."

Bogie gave Winters an amused glance. "Ah-ha! Ghosts again, eh?"

"Don't mention ghosts to me," Winters replied grouchy. "There ain't no such things."

While waiting for his drink, Winters looked around to see who was present and if by chance there was a wanted monkey among them. His dark, mirthless eyes fell upon a small, grinning man who stood alone and good-naturedly returned his scrutiny.

"Who's he, Doc?" Winters asked.

"Ah," said Bogannon in an excited, happy mood. "Winters, my good friend, Danny Sobo."

"Hi-yuh, there," said Sobo, nodding and smiling where he stood.

"Hi-yuh, there, yourself," said Winters. He arched an eyebrow at Bogie. "What's Sobo got that makes him so pleased with himself?"

"Winters," said Bogie, "Danny Sobo is world famous as a man who cannot be lifted."

Winters drank half of his wine at one draw and dragged a hand across his mustache. "Can't be lifted, eh? Here's where I'd like to see Bull-lifter Clark."

"Who's he, Winters?" a gold-digger asked.

Winters finished his wine and turned his back to Bogannon. "Clark was a man down on Trinity River, when I was a button in Texas. He was one of those fellows you hear about who had a bull calf he was real proud of; named him Houston. Clark had heard of bull-lifters, so he took to lifting Houston once every day. Figured if he kept it up, he could lift Houston when he was a full-grown bull. Done all right, too, until Houston weighed nearly a thousand pounds. Then Houston took a notion to lift Bull-lifter. Me and my pa helped bury Bull-lifter."

A big gold-digger stared at Danny Sobo. "I don't believe even Bull-lifter Clark could of lifted Sobo here."

"I don't believe so either," said Sobo.

"He's fastened down," said another gold-digger.

"Oh, no, I'm not," said Sobo. He lifted each foot in turn for inspection. "I've been accused of everything. Men have sworn I had concealed hooks on my shoes; others have declared I paralyzed their arms; some said I used mesmerism. But it's not so; I've always played it fair."

"He's performed before Queen Victoria," exulted Bogie. "Ay, and before Napoleon Three-eye."

"And," said Danny Sobo, "don't forget King Victor Emmanuel Two-eye."

"He's made and lost more fortunes than he can remember," said Bogie.

"Napoleon Three-eye offered to make him a general," said a gold-digger.

"That isn't quite accurate," said Danny Sobo. "He offered to make me a captain, however."

Winters nodded at Bogannon. "Doc, you ought to be able to lift him. Have you tried it?"

"I tried it, Winters. Tried so hard, I nearly busted myself."

Sobo smiled at Winters. "Would you like to try it, Officer Winters?"

"What's in it for me, if I lift you?" Winters asked.

"Whatever you'd like to bet on it," said Sobo.

"And he'll give you one free lift, Winters," said Doc.

"Sure I will," said Danny. "Come here and let me explain."

Winters stepped out. "Start explaining."

"Put your hands above my belt," Danny explained. "Just under my ribs."

Winters followed instructions. "Now what?"

"Lift me."

Winters flexed his hard muscles and lifted. He lifted Danny about two feet and tossed him on up. "Nothin' to it," he commented dryly.

Sobo smiled. "That was your free lift, just to show you that I'm not fastened down; next one is what you bet on."

Winters planked down a twenty-dollar gold-piece in front of Bogannon. "I'll make it a double-eagle."

Sobo matched him. "Now, this time it won't be so easy. You proceed as before."

They faced each other. Winters crouched, his hands under Sobo's ribs and lifted. He tugged and strained until his eyes bugged. He gave up. "Be-confound," he said, and wiped his face.

Sobo pocketed his own money and his winnings. "Don't feel badly about it, Marshal; you did no worse than anybody else."

Winters put down another coin. "Wine, Doc. And one for Sobo."

"A small one," said Sobo.

They drank together and Winters offered his hand. "Shake."

Sobo and Winters shook hands.

"Goodnight, Doc," said Winters. At Bogie's batwings he turned and stared at Danny Sobo. He made no comment; he merely shook his head and left.

DOC GRINNED at Sobo. "I think he likes you, Danny; I don't recall his ever before having shaken hands with a stranger."

Sobo grinned. "You'll be surprised to know he almost lifted me, too; had me scared for a second."

Bogannon glanced at his watch. It was midnight. He began to tidy up for closing.

And while he was busy, a stranger in a black cloak rose from a remote table and came forward. He disregarded miners who had risen and were leaving. His eye was on Danny Sobo, and he had a very peculiar eye, one that possessed command and hints of tremendous spiritual power.

He grasped Sobo's right hand in his own and pressed it warmly. His voice was gentle and reassuring. "Would you honor me by allowing me to speak with you a moment?"

Sobo smiled pleasantly. "Of course; though I have talked with kings, I still love my common brothers."

"Good—good. And I deem it both a privilege and a pleasure to be one of your common brothers. Shall we stroll by moonlight?"

"Nothing more to my notion, sir." Outside, Danny paused and gave his companion an appraisal. He looked upon a man past middle age, over six feet tall, gaunt and loosely joined, yet easy and quite cordial and obliging in manner.

"My name, as you have a right to know, is Solon Christopher Seneca Aristophanes."

"Some name," said Danny Sobo. "Chris for short, perhaps?"

Aristophanes smiled. "Perhaps." He put an arm about Danny's shoulders and urged him gently along.

They came to an abandoned store building and sat on its porch.

"Now, Chris, you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes," said Aristophanes. "So I did. But, first, let me tell you about myself. Not so many miles from here there is an ancient, imposing edifice where my friends and I are engaged in momentous studies. In particular, we study life's mysteries. We are scholars—all. Perhaps you, in your reading or in your extensive travels, have heard of secluded castles—venerable cloisters, mountain observatories and hospices—where men of great hearts and indomitable minds have dedicated themselves to search for universal truth. Mysteries, they were called in ancient times. We—my scholarly friends and I—have modeled our institution after those Mysteries of ancient Greece, particularly those of Eleusis. You have heard of them, of course—those Eleusian Mysteries?"

"Sure," said Danny Sobo. He had never heard of Eleusian Mysteries, anymore than he had performed before Napoleon Three-eye, but he was not one to belittle himself. "Heard of them plenty of times. Right interesting."

"So glad you are brilliant and open-minded. My story is this, Dr. Sobo; I am inviting you to join our faculty."

"Whoops!" exclaimed Danny. "Me a college professor?"

"Ah," said Chris, "you are too modest. But of such is true greatness." He got up. "Come, great one. You, in your ingenious way, have solved one of life's secrets; I saw you performing at Bogannon's. Your achievement qualifies you to become one of us."

Danny sprang up. "Oh, sure; I could tell you a thing or two, you bet. But being a college professor would be too quiet for me. Besides, I've never liked musty smells."

"So original!" exclaimed Chris. "But I shall not over-persuade you." He stepped out to a hitch-rail where two saddled horses waited drowsily. "I brought along an extra horse, hoping I should meet someone worthy to be our guest overnight. Our beds are soft, our meals superlative. Ah, it is like a corner of paradise."

While Chris made an insignificant stirrup-leather adjustment, Danny was thinking. "Doctor" Sobo, eh? He'd never been called that before. Nor had anybody referred to his clever trick as solution of one of life's mysteries. Say, now! If he could clothe himself and his reputation in high-sounding titles and magic colors, he might even yet perform

before queens and three-eyed kings.

"Maybe I'll ride out with you, after all, Dr. Chris. Sure won't hurt nothin' to look around."

"Ah," said Chris, "a pleasant and fateful decision. Come."

They mounted and their horses swung eagerly away.

Danny Sobo took a parting glance at Forlorn Gap, saw a light and a lone stagecoach in front of Goodlett Hotel. There was no other visible sign of life anywhere. Winds, sweeping north across Alkali Flat, moaned softly through deserted, empty, windowless houses.

"Kind of spooky," said Danny.

"Yes," said Chris with an air of abstraction. "Yet all things live but to die. But, ah, death, what is thy significance?"

A queer sensation ran its foreboding fingers up and down Danny's spine. Moaning winds seemed to say, "*Look here, little man, you'd better play shy of this gloomy gent you're riding with; for all you know, he's a ghost.*"

"Where is this college of yours, Dr. Chris?"

Their horses moved at a rebellious, snorting canter.

"College?" said Chris. "But call it a college if you like. It is said that Aristotle, an olive grove, a few logs to sit upon and a group of Athenian youths to talk to, comprised a university. Our college, so-called, is a few miles west, then south into a quiet, ancient valley. Lost centuries look down upon us there. It is where voices that shaped human destiny are heard again. There we walk and talk with Caesar—"

"Sounds cuckoo," said Danny.

"So it does," said Chris, reining his horse close beside Danny's and putting both into a lope. "But not cuckoo to a man with your magic powers, Dr. Sobo. Possessed additionally with our secrets, which we shall freely impart, you will see past ages moving before you—marching armies of Asia, gladiatorial games of Roman arenas, storms, infernos, pestilences; persecutions, countless scaffolds and their equally countless dead. As through a magic glass, you will see human souls wing their way into eternity. Cries of agony will lose themselves in sweeping songs of victory, and you will see mankind at last unfettered and free . . ."

higher and higher as clatter of hoofs made more and more confusion of sound and echo. For a while he regarded Chris as cuckoo, but as Chris talked on, and as moonlit miles of winding mountain and canyon road slipped behind them, Danny lost himself in wonder and an ecstasy of expectation. Great cliffs that towered and echoed about them corroborated Chris's intimations of mystery, revelation, and foretaste of immortality.

When they had turned south and massive cliffs had receded to right and left to form a valley, Danny's deliverance was from shadowed and trembling wonder into a rapturous illusion of paradise.

"Say!" he croaked, surprised at his own vocal queerness. "This is a real spot. Where are we?"

"This," said Salon Christopher Seneca Aristophanes, "is called *Terre des Revenantes*, or land of ghosts."

"Ghosts, eh? You don't think there's really ghosts hereabouts?"

"Ghost is only another name for spirit," said Chris. "There are spirits here; indeed, they are countless. Though you cannot see them, they are all around you."

"No spoofing!" said Danny, his voice wheezy. He rubbed his Adam's apple in an effort to adjust his vocal facilities. "I don't think I care for it, if that's how it is."

"One has little choice in such thing," said Chris. "There is a destiny here that will take you in charge; thereafter your will shall not be your own."

"Sounds loony," said Danny.

"You would not wish to turn back, of course?"

"I could do very well with it, I think."

"Of course, if greatness is not in you—"

"I didn't say that. What you've been saying sort of gets me. Besides, this whole country looks spooky. So misty and quiet," Danny said.

"That is why it should appeal to one with your secret powers."

"Does kind of catch me. But where is that big mansion of a place you spoke of?"

Chris had veered their horses eastward. "You shall see it soon," said he. "According to legend, a French explorer gave it a name—*La Maison Sans Vie*."

"Latch onto that, will you!"

"It means house without life."

Their loping horses were now under a cliff so high that stars seemed set as jewels in its summit.

THIS WAS all very strange to Danny, especially when it came on a voice that rose

Danny Sobo looked up, and back, and out into *Terre des Revenantes*. “House without life, huh? Imagine a dead house.”

“Ho!” said Chris, reining his horse down. When Danny had done likewise, he pulled in close. “We should be quiet now. A soul may be about to take its flight.”

A moment later they were before it—*La Maison Sans Vie*. In a cavernous recess to their left it lay, a great mass of stone, a westerling moon splashing light upon it, in its enormity vague suggestions of form and orderliness, ghostly, too, in its silence.

“Creepers!” Danny exclaimed wheezily. “It’s a wreck.”

“Shhh!” whispered Chris. “We dismount now and approach on foot. Here a presence hovers, to which we, as mortals, owe our homage.” He dismounted, and Danny followed his example.

A figure disengaged itself from stones and appeared before them. “Welcome, master,” it said.

Danny caught his breath. Had it not spoken, he would have thought this strange, white-robed creature a ghost.

“You are a faithful servant,” Chris said. “He will take our horses here, Dr. Sobo.”

Danny disliked parting with his horse, but before he could object, it was taken from him and led away.

La Maison Sans Vie received them in silence. At first there were shapeless heaps of stone, but soon they were in a moonlit corridor. For seconds their own two shadows moved before them, then Danny perceived that he was walking on heads and arms of other shadows. A quick glance disclosed that three white-robed figures had appeared behind and were silently following them.

Latch onto that, thought Danny, with a shiver. A glance at Chris told him that his companion had lost himself in trance-like intensity. Over them a ceiling closed, and their progress was along a hallway from which doors opened into dark and silent rooms. Lamps, half-hidden in niches, supplied where moonlight ceased to penetrate.

They advanced slowly, enveloped in soft glow, their footsteps noiseless upon a sandy, shadowless floor.

CHRIS TURNED a corner and followed an intersecting corridor to his right. Danny glanced back as he likewise turned. Five ghostly figures followed them now; faintly illumined as

they were, Danny nevertheless could see that they were men—gaunt, bloodless men with strange, staring eyes.

Creepers! he thought.

But they must have been a proper part of things; Chris paid them no heed, but moved slowly on, tense, chin slightly lifted, his manner signifying his consciousness of a momentous presence.

At a lighted doorway, Chris stopped. Instantly a man in a black cloak emerged and admonished them to silence. He held in his right hand a goose-quill writing pen, in his left a board upon which was spread a paper. “Come quickly, my brother,” he said to Chris. “A mortal is about to give up his soul. This time we must not fail to see it depart.”

Chris nodded gravely and entered. Danny, knowing nothing better to do, followed. He sat down on a stone bench, as did Chris and his fraternal brother. A hidden lamp whose rays reflected themselves from a low, damp ceiling, filled their room with an eerie light.

Danny blinked at what he saw. Chained opposite him by wall manacles were three ragged human bodies. Two clearly were dead. That one on Danny’s extreme right was as clearly at death’s threshold. Already his feet and legs had ceased to aid in his support. All of his weight now was borne by raw, emaciated wrists and hands so thin and fleshless that one of them had slipped halfway through its iron bracelet.

This mortal still breathed, but at rare intervals, and then only in a rasping, weak gurgle. Danny stared, at first horrified, then in crazed fascination. He watched, his eyes no longer blinking. A man was passing from life into death. Danny had seen a few men killed. Those killings had been done in fights—man against man, each battling for his life. He had never before seen a man chained to a wall and hung there to die—as a study. *Creepers!*

How long this poor fellow had been there, he could only surmise. Weeks, no doubt. Possibly a month. But it was about over. Consciousness was gone. A few more breaths—

It ended, and before Danny realized he was seeing a last breath drawn. Death announced itself with a sigh, and stillness, and in that stillness was eternity. Then, as Danny continued to stare, a white something, larger than any butterfly he had ever seen, but resembling one, appeared from somewhere in their midst and moved noiselessly hither and yon—and disappeared.

“That moth again!” exclaimed Chris’ fraternal brother, giving his writing board an impatient smack. “This experiment will have to be done all over again.” He added resolutely, “But we’ll try a new system.”

Danny did not move. But he felt that staring, crazy eyes had fixed themselves upon him.

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters lay awake in his bed. His wife, too, had found sleep elusive.

“Lee, what troubles you?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Nor can I. It’s because I’m worried about you.”

Winters sat up. “Tell me something, Myra; be plain honest. Have you noticed any signs of insanity in me lately?”

It was Myra’s turn to sit up. “Why, Lee, of course not. Why do you ask such a silly question?”

“Because I’ve been seeing ghosts. And, of course, there ain’t no such things as ghosts.”

“Maybe there are, Lee. At any rate, there are things that look like ghosts. Where have you seen ghosts this time?”

“In that valley we visited two months ago. Remember that old Indian ruin?”

“Uh-huh. But why?”

“Ghosts.”

“Now, Lee!”

“Ever hear any ghost stories about that place?”

Myra studied about that. Moonlight, slanting in at their west window, made objects in their upstairs bedroom distinguishable. Winters could see his beautiful wife, arms hugged around her knees, head bent in thought. Sometimes, in contemplation of her loveliness, he feared he was only dreaming that she existed, that this world he wandered in was only a fantasy, contrasting beauty against a background of lawlessness and horror.

“No,” Myra said at last, “I’ve never heard any ghost stories about our strange valley, but it does have a ghostly name—in French, you know. *Terre des Revenantes*, which means land of ghosts, as I recall.”

“What else do you remember about it?” Winters persisted.

“Oh!” Myra exclaimed in sudden recollection. “Now I remember. It is a legend Doc Bogannon’s half-breed Shoshone wife told me. I’d almost forgotten it. Sort of a crazy thing—about a hollow rock.”

“Go on.”

“It had something to do about those people who lived in *La Maison Sans Vie*. This story was handed down by Shoshone Indians, whose ancestors stormed *La Maison*, killed its warriors, but saved some of their women for wives. Once, long before, a strange man came there and made love to a beautiful maiden. He won her heart, then he deserted her—or tried to. After this lovely one had killed herself, he was captured and imprisoned in this hollow rock. It’s like a huge, deep kettle inside. This unfaithful lover was lowered into it, and then a stream of water was fixed to spray upon him every so often—as often as his body became dry.”

“Sounds crazy,” said Winters.

“But wait; it was not so crazy. This was mineral water, like water that runs from caves. He was wet. Then, when he dried, he was covered by a thin layer of stone. Then he was wet again. At last he was so encased in rock that he sat down and died. He’s still sitting there—a man turned to stone.”

Winters slid down and stretched out. “Now who’s loony?” he said, disgusted.

Myra lay down, too. “I don’t think an Indian could imagine anything like that. There must have been basic truth for it some time or other. But don’t let it worry you, Lee.”

“It does worry me, though. I wanted to preempt that valley. Being a deputy marshal never did appeal to me much. It gets worse so.”

BEING A deputy marshal kept him busy—too busy to worry much about his troubles and superstitions. Winters spent all of next day looking for a wanted monkey north of Cow Creek. It was almost midnight when again he dropped in at Bogannon’s for a nightcap.

Bogie was alone and getting ready to leave. “Winters! You’re just in time.”

They had wine together at a table, and Winters remembered something. “Doc, where’s that little man who couldn’t be lifted?”

Bogie gave a palm-up gesture of nonchalance. “Oh, here today and gone tomorrow, I suppose. In such manner, countless strangers come and go at this place. Forlorn Gap was once a town where people stopped to stay a while. It is mostly a ghost—”

“Stop!” snapped Winters. “Don’t talk about ghosts.”

Bogannon smiled indulgently. “Well, then, it’s a

town most of whose inhabitants have moved away. Oh, hold a second. I do remember now. Our little man left last night at midnight. Busy with closing up, I didn't pay much attention."

"Alone?"

"With a stranger."

"Like what?"

"A queer looking sort, sure enough."

"Describe him."

"Tall—six-feet-four, at least. Gaunt as a hard-wintered steer. Had a queer look in his eye, too. Between forty and fifty, no doubt. Bareheaded. Longish hair, slightly gray, otherwise dark. Wore a long black cloak."

"Any warts, moles or ringworms?"

Bogie reflected intently. "There was something odd-numbered about him. Yes, I have it. His skull at his left temple was sunken; gave his head a vaguely lopsided appearance. His face had a solemn, but kindly expression. If you likened him to anything in nature, other than man, I'd say he resembled a kindly old buzzard."

"Seen this old buzzard on any other occasion?"

"Possibly so. Yes, truly, he's been in my saloon before. Weeks back, however."

"Anybody go with him then when he left?"

"My memory is not that good, Winters."

That ended it. Winters waited outside until Bogie had closed up. He led Cannon Ball and walked with Bogannon until their ways parted.

Winters swung aboard then. "Goodnight, Doc."

"Goodnight, Winters."

Doc Bogannon's memory fell to work as he proceeded alone, and in a blaze it came back to him. A man *had* left with that black-robed buzzard. He remembered now, turned back and called loudly, "Winters!"

But Cannon Ball, eager to get home to his feed-rack, had carried Winters beyond call.

WINTERS, after another night of intermittent sleep and wakefulness, rode to Elkhorn Pass in further search of his wanted monkey. He was returning empty-handed when, an hour before sunset, he met Bogannon's kindly old buzzard. He was riding a fine sorrel and leading a pack-laden donkey.

"Howdy," said Winters.

"Good evening, sir."

Winters rode on and had passed round a curve before recognition flashed in his mind. He pulled

Cannon Ball to a sliding halt. But what should he do? So far as he knew, this stranger in a black cloak was not a wanted monkey. He looked loony, but picking up addle-brains was not a part of Winters' job.

Then Winters remembered a certain little man who couldn't be lifted, a likable fellow who had won twenty dollars off of him. Danny Sobo had left Bogannon's with that loony Winters had just met, and he hadn't returned. Winters was curious enough to turn back and ask a few questions.

Before he'd turned, however, his mouth dropped open and sweat popped on his face. No wonder he hadn't thought of it at first. It had been almost a year since Marshal Hugo Landers had sent him notice from Brazerville about a bunch of loonies—homicidal nuts—who had set fire to some bughouse and burned themselves out of house and home. Most dangerous of them was one with a sunken skull, a certain Grow Murchison, alias Solon Christopher something-or-other.

Winters swabbed his face and headed back. He kept out of sight except when he needed to make sure of where his quarry should leave Elkhorn Road. That turn-off came about sunset, and Winters perspired again. Loony Chris had turned south, toward *Terre des Revenantes*, toward *La Maison Sans Vie*.

It was no easy thing for Winters to make up his mind to follow, but he made it up. After sunset he had only starlight to guide him. That was not enough. He waited until a silvery sphere appeared eastward and cast its light upon mountains and cliffs. While he waited, he took a reserve six-gun from his war-bags and belted it on. He examined both guns carefully, satisfied himself they were ready to make thunder.

He was somewhat late in reaching *La Maison*, but being able to see it, even indistinctly by diffused moonlight, he regarded as an advantage. At sight of it, he dismounted quickly, ground-hitched his horse and stepped forward cautiously. An owl rose from a heap of stones and swooped toward him. Its beak snapped sharply as it passed close to his head. Bats zigzagged overhead; their wings gave out faint whistling sounds.

Near a lighted entrance, Winters stopped, dropped behind disordered stones and listened. Voices that sounded far-off drifted out to him. Odors of broiled meat and other foods came, too. This was propitious; Chris and his companions

would be at supper; there'd probably be no strays loitering about.

He eased out of hiding and entered *La Maison*, its gloom receding as he advanced into its lighted interior. After a right turn, he paused near a room from which a brighter light fell across his path. Warily he peered in. Instantly his flesh chilled; unconsciously he gasped. Hanging in chains against a bare wall was a dead body. His horror abated slightly when he determined that it was not Danny Sobo's remains. *But*, he thought, *there could be others.*

He entered and extended his search. This was a long room which had been fitted as a prison, or torture chamber. Farther down he recoiled in terror from other manacled bodies. He must have made a sound, for seconds later he heard running feet.

"All," a voice said in gentle surprise. "We have a guest."

A gaunt man in a black cloak had entered. After him came one like him. Others in ghostly white garb followed. They clustered just within and stared at Winters. In all, there were seven. Winters caught them by surprise, by lifting his six-guns.

"Where is Murchison?" Winters demanded.

Chris looked at his companions. "Murchison, he says. Sir, my name is Solon Christopher Seneca Aristophanes."

Winters, assured now that he had guessed correctly as to identification of Chris, was nevertheless uneasy. This Solon Christopher was crafty, therefore dangerous.

"Where is he, Chris? Where is Danny Sobo?" Winters asked.

Chris opened his mouth and nodded his head slowly. "Ah, sir, no doubt you have reference to your little man who could not be lifted."

"Where is he?"

Chris and his henchmen nodded at one another.

Chris said, "We lifted him."

"I want him," said Winters.

Chris looked around and nodded. He must have given another sign, too, for his robed followers thrust their right hands beneath their robes. Those

hands came out with derringers, one-shot pistols and six-guns in them, and roaring chaos set in.

When thunder and fire had ceased, Lee Winters alone emerged through a fog of smoke. He carried a lamp and shook his head repeatedly to clear it of deafness. From far off came a faint cry for help.

SHORTLY before midnight, Doc Bogannon, alone at last and fixing to close, was startled by a wild cry outside his saloon. His doors swung inward, and Danny Sobo staggered in. "Yippee!" he yelled, and promptly fell on his face.

Bogie's doors swung again, and Winters strode in.

"Winters!" Bogie shouted.

"A bit of help, Doc," said Winters.

Together they lifted Danny Sobo and set him in a chair.

"What's wrong with him, Winters?"

"He's drunk. On brandy we took from *La Maison Sans Vie*," Winters explained.

Bogie wore a puzzled look. "Huh? But what makes him feel so hard, Winters? He's like a rock."

"That's only his clothes, Doc," said Winters. "I reckon they've petrified. Fetch us a nightcap and I'll tell you a ghost story."

Bogie brought wine and glasses. He poured drinks for himself and Winters. "Let's have your ghost story. But I warn you—I don't believe in ghosts."

"No?" said Winters, looking much like a ghost himself. "You don't believe in ghosts now, but wait until you hear Danny Sobo's story."

Danny raised his head and looked at Bogie, his eyes rolling. Without success, he tried to get up. His clothes crackled like breaking ice. Slumped back, he closed his eyes, and his lashes stuck out like spines. In texture and color, his hair was like threads of pink glass.

Bogie shook his head in pity. "I can't believe it."

Winters drank quickly to hide his nervousness. "You never will believe it, Doc. Nothing like this could happen in our time."