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What was the secret of the light, far up the mountainside—and the terrible cries that arose every now and then?

LANTERN In The SKY

Lee Winters Story
by Lon Williams

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters, homeward bound by night, rounded a perilous curve on Mt. Horeb Road. Instinct, or his natural fear of incomprehensibles, caused him to draw his horse Cannon Ball to a quick stop. His darting, watchful eye had caught a rectangle of light on one of those massive heights of stone on his right, so far up that it suggested a window of Infinity. For one moment it was softly aglow; then there was darkness, except where countless stars glittered.

Silence for seconds was deep and eerie. Its very intensity heralded imminent and terrifying sound.

That sound came as a scream. Nothing rendered by vocal cords could have surpassed it for sheer horror; it pierced downward and echoed among towers and granite walls, its duration long and chilling. Inability to see its source, except as a flicker of shadow, detracted nothing from its harrowing revelation, namely, that a man was falling hundreds of feet to certain death.

Lee sleeved his cold forehead.

Then a quarrelsome, shaken voice reached him from nearby. “What did you think of that, stranger?”

Winters held a tight rein as Cannon Ball shifted nervously. His search disclosed that he was not alone; a bearded small man sat on a ledge above him on his left, his booted feet a-dangle, as from a porch.

Winters gripped his six-gun. “Who are you?” he demanded.

Answer came with snarling unfriendliness. “You’ve no cause to be skeered of me, stranger. Though it’s no concern of yours, I’m only a harmless prospector hereabouts, name of Billy Hornbarker. By that thing shining on your vest, I judge you an officer of sorts.”

“You judge correctly,” said Winters; “I’m Deputy Marshal Lee Winters of Forlorn Gap.”

“Forlorn Gap, eh? That’s almost saying you’re nobody. Why hang around a dead town like that?”

Winters had his own brand of unfriendliness. “Though it’s no concern of yours, Hornbarker, I operate from Forlorn Gap because that’s my official station. It’s a crossroads place, a good spot for catching wanted monkeys.”

“You seem right sure of yourself, Winters. That being so, maybe you can explain that light up yonder and that ghostly scream you heard.”

“You ought to know more’n I do about that,” retorted Winters. “You’re a prospector hereabouts, while I’m only a passerby.”

“I know if you look long and careful, you can see another light,” said Hornbarker. “It’s no bigger’n a star; must be a lantern, because it don’t move on and hide behind mountaintops, as stars do. That much I know.”

Winters looked upward, stared hard and long. At last he saw what might have been a light in a small window. “Your manners could be mended, Horny, but I’ll say you’ve got sharp enough eyes. Light up there, all right; being a harmless prospector hereabouts, maybe you’ve seen it before?”

“Yep,” said Hornbarker. “Seed it last night from my camp higher up. Few nights ago, too. Ain’t seed no door open before, though, nor heard no screams. Way I figure, somebody stepped, or was heaved, from that door into eternity. Seein’ as you’re an officer, why don’t you go up there and see what’s doin’?”

“Maybe I don’t want to,” said Winters.

“Sort of figured you didn’t,” sneered Hornbarker. “How come you riding this grizzly-bear trail by night anyhow?”

“Glad you asked me that,” said Lee with angry challenge. “I’m searching for a wanted monkey name of Zin Daker, a name that sounds sort of like Hornbarker. He’s an icy-eyed straw-blond of about thirty, five feet-ten and has a knife scar behind his left ear. Maybe that describes you?”

"You seem right sure of yourself, Winters. Maybe you can explain that light up yonder, and that scream we just heard."

Hornbarker leaned over and spat. “Nope, not me. My scars are lower down.”

“Maybe you’ve seen him?”

“And maybe I ain’t.”

“If you knowed where he’s at,” said Winters, “you’d be too ornery to tell.”

Hornbarker grunted. “Lost his trail, did you?”

Lee reflected with shivers that he’d lost his nerve, as well. He’d tracked Daker to a lonely region where dim trails merged with a maze of ancient warpaths and imagined ghosts could be seen peering from behind every crag and queer-shaped stone. “Yeah,” he said, “I lost his trail.”

“No wonder,” declared Hornbarker. “If you’d had as much sense as that big horse you’re on, you wouldn’t gone into that north country. It’s full of spooks. I never camp there myself; I ain’t that lame-brained.”

Winters lifted Cannon Ball’s reins and kneed his ribs. “You look too much like a spook yourself to be afraid of ghosts,” he said icily. “More’n that, your bad manners make me think maybe you are a ghost. Anyhow, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Winters. If you’ve nerve enough to see what’s up yonder on that sky-scrapin’ pinnacle, I’d be curious to know.”

Cannon Ball moved away, his feet lifted high with each step. Winters called back, “If you’re so curious, I suggest you go up and see for yourself.”

Hornbarker’s response was a taunting, flat laugh.

But it was not Hornbarker that disturbed Lee’s thoughts. Indeed, he hardly had any thoughts. What he felt was of much greater depths. Up there on that stony height was certainly some puzzle of dangerous import. Either a sentence of death had just been executed in a terrifying manner, or supernatural forces had fashioned its ghostly voice and spectral image. An individual man, in contrast to nature’s immensity in earth and darkness, was infinitesimal. Yet death, so recently enacted and personified, was all-pervasive in its inexpressible coldness.

Winters, scared and shivering, hunched down into his vest and listened hazily to Cannon Ball’s clattering, monotonous hoofs.

IN FORLORN GAP, night was still young. This town was, truly, a haunted place. Ghostly remnant of a town that was, it presented but few dwellings among its many deserted, windowless, moaning houses. One bright spot remained, however, where wayfarers spent pleasant hours while waiting to journey on northward to Pangborn Gulch, or westward to Elkhorn Pass. This lively spot was Doc Bogannon’s saloon, only institution of its kind that was left.

Bogannon, its owner, was himself a man of mystery, his origin undisclosed, a man of talent and education, but content to stay in this nowhere-place as operator of a saloon and to live with a half-breed Shoshone for a wife.

He had just finished serving drinks and was relaxing with folded arms behind his bar. He was tall, broad-shouldered, darkly handsome with his black hair and magnificent face. In disposition he was even-tempered, generous, kind and philosophical. To him in some particulars, human tides were like morning fogs driven by gentle winds. They passed, indistinct, unrevealing, soon forgotten.

But now and then an unforgettable individual

emerged from that drifting obscurity to stand for a while, clear and distinct. Sometimes he was a braggart, sometimes a ruthless killer. Occasionally there came an orator, dyspeptic, squint-eyed monkey, lunatic, or insufferable dude.

And now, at last, a poet!

This character placed a small coin on Bogie's bar. He drew himself up proudly, gray-haired, shabby, thin, but confident in his excellence of mind and spirit. He held in his hands a musical instrument that roughly resembled a banjo with many strings.

"Wine, Bogannon," he said haughtily. When he had received and swallowed his drink, he smacked his wide lips and added pompously, "I, Greenleaf Baytree, am a wandering minstrel and troubadour. Poetry and music are my forte, companion arts in whose mastery I am without a peer."

"Indeed," said Bogie, instantly curious. "And that instrument you have?"

Baytree responded proudly, "It is a zither, sir. I made it myself. This handle which you might call a neck is for convenience in holding it. Like my instrument, my poems, also, are my own creation. For example: *I sing to rocks and rills; to vales and templed hills; from them in echoes clear, my song goes everywhere; to all who mourn it brings sweet healing in its wings.*"

He continued at length and strummed his zither meanwhile.

When he had stopped, Bogie exclaimed, "Excellent!"

Customers tossed small coins, which clinked at Baytree's feet.

Baytree bowed and gathered them up. "Thank you, gentlemen."

"What kind of poetry do you call that, what's recited to music?" a bearded customer asked.

"Lyrical couplets, my dear sir."

"Couplets? What's couplets?"

A teamster spat into a sandbox. "Aw," he drawled, "couplet is what you couple a wagon with. It's a kingpin, that's what."

GREENLEAF BAYTREE'S countenance expressed acute pain. "There, Bogannon," he commented sadly, "is an illustration of things that have broken my heart and spirit. Ingratitude. Incapacity for appreciation. Cold, impenetrable density of human minds." He indicated with a hand wave. "These wretched creatures in human form scoff at my genius, and consolation for me is only in knowing that they are but mere scum and dregs. But so has it always been. It was said of Homer, divine poet of antiquity, *Seven cities contend for Homer dead, wherein the living Homer begged his bread.* There'll be a time, sirs, when every oaf of you will boast of having seen this humble poet and heard him sing his own song. But, alas, you will remember me only to realize too late what fools you were."

"Listen to that, will you?" a card player with a sense of humor shouted. "He's a prophet, too. Toss him a coin; here."

More coins were tossed. Baytree picked them, up, calmed and began again to strum his zither.

Then Bogie's batwings swung in and a lean, wiry, weather-beaten gentleman with badge and dark mustache strode in.

"Winters!" exclaimed Bogannon. "Come in, Winters."

Winters strode up and planked down a coin. "Wine, Doc."

"Wine it is," declared Bogie, happy to have his friend Winters present. He filled a glass. "You look right solemn, Winters: didn't run afoul of ghosts, did you?"

"No, Doc, it's a right peaceable world." Winters picked up his glass and turned round for glances at Bogie's customers. He recognized no wanted monkey, but a long-haired character with a musical instrument and a contemptuous eye caught his attention. Winters drank and nodded. "Who's he, Doc?"

"Ah," exclaimed Bogie. "My apology, Winters. This is my new friend Greenleaf Baytree, poet and musician extraordinary; Baytree, meet my old and trusted friend Deputy Marshal Lee Winters."

Neither Winters nor Baytree offered to shake hands. Winters was wary of Bogie's new friends, while Baytree's expression of unbounded contempt explained his own aloofness.

"Poet, eh?" said Winters. "Now, that's a notch on Caesar's pistol. I've seen musicians, but never before a real live poet. Right interesting."

"A rare privilege," agreed Bogie, "to meet a man who is not a mere reciter of verses, but one who composes his own."

"I've often wondered," said Lee, "how those fellers looked who wrote verses, but never figured 'em to be so long-haired and starved looking. Does writing poetry give a man that look, or is it only

hungry-lookers that can write poems?"

Baytree's nostrils spread with accentuated scorn. "Any fool can scoff, but where is there a fool who can write a poem?"

"There," said Bogie, "I call that a fair question."

Winters put down his empty glass. "I admit I could never write verses, but I sure learned one when I was a button that has stuck to me like a wart."

"Do tell,'' said Bogie. "Recite it, Winters."

"Certainly," said Winters. "It was one my pa learned from his pa long before he ever saw Texas. My pa learned it to me and I recited it at a speeching in a schoolhouse down in Trinity Valley. I remember it as well as if it was yesterday." He squared his shoulders, drew in his chin, and recited:

Once I had an old coon dog;
Now I wish I had him back;
He chased the big hogs over the fence,
And the little ones through the crack.

"Hooray!" several guests shouted.

"Winters, you're a genius," observed a sarcastic one.

Bogie said, "That's real poetry, Winters. It's got everything—devotion, pathos, action, imaginative suggestion, vivid realism. I'd say, without fear of contradiction, that it deserves immortality."

Greenleaf Baytree was indignant. "It's an inexcusable debasement of life's sublimest art. You recite vulgar, clumsy doggerel and call it poetry! You should die by torture."

Winters put down another coin. "Wine for our poet friend, Doc. I've recited all I know. Now that my reputation with Green Baytree is beyond improvement, I give you goodnight." He took one more searching glance at Bogie's customers and left.

A MOMENT later one of those customers rose, came forward and laid his hands gently on Baytree's shoulders. "Sir, I could almost call you brother."

Both Bogie and Baytree stared at him. In Bogie's opinion, here was a character, if ever such there was. He was tall, slender, straight. A dark cloak, fastened by a string at his throat, fell gracefully down his shoulders and back. His nose was extraordinarily thin and sharp, his cheeks prominent, his eyes dark, hypnotic. There was no hint of humor in his expression. That which proclaimed itself as something to be remembered was his unsmiling sublimity. Its quality suggested sweet realms unknown to ordinary men.

Baytree said as one enchanted, "I—indeed, I do have a feeling of exalted kinship. Pray tell, who are you?"

"My name, sir, is Alexander Murdoc. A name, however, does not answer your question. Who I am can only be learned from close and intimate association. In earthy inadequate terminology, I am a poet. Could you understand if I should tell you that I am a reincarnation of antiquity's greatest poet? And that poet not a man, but a woman called Sappho?"

"Certainly," said Baytree. "That I can easily believe. And could you believe that I have John Milton's soul, reincarnate? That which made me realize as much was an experience in memorizing poetry. Simple verses I remember with difficulty. But when I read 'Paradise Lost,' it was like reading something I had written myself. With one reading I knew it by memory. Here, I can recite it to you."

"No, no," Alexander Murdoc interposed quickly. "Some other time; just now my companions await me."

"Are they poets, too?"

"They are poets. I should say, poets extraordinary." He turned from Baytree and put down a coin. "Bogannon, wine for me and my esteemed brother in art."

Bogie came out of momentary enchantment. "Oh, yes. Baytree has a free drink coming; I'd almost forgotten." He filled two glasses and his artist guests drank with grace and appreciation.

"I was about to say," Murdoc resumed, "that my companions and I reside in regal splendor not far from here. We live in and maintain what we reverently call Time's Mytilenean Mansion of Divine Sappho. I almost invited you to join us. That, of course, would be unfair to other members of our society. But you could pay us a visit. After we have heard you more extensively, we might invite you to become one of us."

Baytree emptied his wine glass of its last drop and put it down. "*Ah, at last I see glory's beckoning light; it reaches up with golden beams; in its sweet magic heaven gleams; it gilds and burns the mountain height.*"

A customer yelled, "Whiskey! Where's that loafing bartender? Whiskey!"

Bogannon jerked, startled. “Oh, yes, whiskey. It’s on its way.”

Murdoc put an arm about Baytree’s shoulders. “Come along with me, my friend; let us leave this vulgar place. You will find at journey’s end, an abode of endless grace.”

BAYTREE yielded to Murdoc’s charms and they went out without a backward look. They mounted horses and rode eastward, then northward along a trail splashed with light from a newly-risen moon. Their course was steadily upward until they reached a high grassy cove, where they left their horses. Thereafter they ascended afoot, at last by ladders, until they were on a flat-topped pinnacle and outside a log cabin large enough for no more than one room.

“Yo-ho,’’ Murdoc called loudly at a heavy door. He knocked and called again, “Open for a kindred spirit and his honored guest.”

There was delay; but sounds of hurried movements drifted from within which suggested that occupants might have been in bed and were getting dressed.

Murdoc explained, “My fraternal associates may have been in meditation, or even in sleep. You will kindly pardon their seeming tardiness.”

“Of course,” said Baytree.

While they waited, he glanced about in fearful admiration. This cabin was perched upon an overhang, so high that he breathed with difficulty in its rarified atmosphere. Horizons were so far distant that stars could be seen by one who looked down, as well as up. It was an awesome pace, yet inspirational, too. Where was there a poet who could not find his Muse in a place like this?

Hinges creaked and a door opened with a suddenness that suggested eagerness and unparalleled hospitality. And such was his greeting.

“Come in, come in, and welcome,” voices called happily.

His volition lost in anticipated delight, Baytree was rushed inside, where he was smothered in handshakes and swift, though gentle attentions. Soft voices purred, Ah, ah, ah, ah. Before he was completely at himself again, his pockets had been emptied and he had been stripped of his hat, vest and coat and draped in a flowing, scarlet cloak.

“There,” sighed Murdoc, “you have taken your first step as candidate for admission to our sublime order. Now I shall introduce you to my comrades in glory.” Three men in black cloaks immediately arranged themselves side by side and tensed to attention. They were tall, long-haired, thin, sallow, and in features strangely alike. In their expressions rested that same unearthly sublimity seen so memorably in Murdoc’s countenance.

Deputy Marshall LEE WINTERS

Murdoc indicated from left to right. “Michel de’Angelo. Apollo Belvedere. Hermes Talaria. Each is a reincarnation of him for whom named. And our guest,” said Murdoc, indicating Baytree himself, “is, like ourselves, an artist. Though his name is Greenleaf Baytree, he claims he is in truth England’s profound singer, John Milton.”

Murdoc’s fraternal brothers nodded stiffly in recognition.

Hermes Talaria said, “We accept no

pretensions, but only proof; let us be seated, brethren, while Baytree proves his claim."

They sat in a row against a bare wall and assumed attitudes of waiting.

Murdoc said, "Baytree, these are your judges." He stepped aside and indicated by a nod that Baytree was expected to perform.

"Would you have me recite, or only play upon my zither?" Baytree asked, his voice rasping and constricted from dryness of tongue.

"Play," said Michel de'Angelo.

Baytree strummed briefly, then nodded. "My own composition," he said with modest pride. He strummed again, gained confidence, then sang to his music, rendering what he had called his lyrical couplets.

His judges listened impassively, leaving him to guess whether they were being pleased or displeased. But when he paused for comment, their opinions came with appalling heartlessness.

"Extremely flat," said Hermes.

"A mere collection of platitudes," said Michel.

"Insipid beyond endurance," said Apollo Belvedere.

Baytree was struck dumb momentarily. Then his anger stirred. "So I encounter more stupidity, do I? You reincarnate nothing from any artist that ever lived. If there is anything in you that is artistic, it is your gift of snobbery. I came here expecting warm fraternal brotherhood and manifestations of kindred spirits. What I've found is an assembly of plaster-faced personifications of mental sterility."

Murdoc, unperturbed, said, "Would you like to try further, Baytree?"

Baytree laid his zither on a rustic table and tore off his scarlet cloak. "I would like my hat, coat and vest," he said curtly.

"As you will," said Murdoc. He took them and handed them one by one to their owner.

Baytree put them on furiously, picked up his zither and turned away scowling. Only one door presented itself as an exit. He lifted its wooden latch, swung it open, gave Murdoc and his comrades one final look of contempt and hatred and stepped out.

Instantly he screamed in terror, for he had stepped into empty space and plunged downward into an abyss of moon-cast shadows.

LEE WINTERS had finished a midnight supper with his beautiful wife, Myra. Now they sat before a small living room fire, while Myra read poetry. She read aloud, a practice which was bearing belated fruit for Lee, whose childhood education had been extremely meager. Myra was especially fond of history; consequently poetry interested her not merely for its own sake, but also for its additional value as a candle-glow upon past ages.

When she had come to a good resting place, Winters said, "Myra, when you was a chick in school, did you learn any verses?"

"Well, of course, Lee; didn't you?''

"I reckon so. Do you recollect any of yours?"

"Oh, yes. Want to hear them?"

"Wouldn't mind. Especially your favorites."

Myra put a finger on her chin and studied. Then her recitations began and continued at length, interspersed by comments from Winters. She said finally, "But there's one little-girl verse I've always been partial to. Right now it's dearer than ever."

"Well, let's have it."

"Sure you won't think I'm silly?"

"I could never think that."

"You'll think it mighty sentimental," said Myra, "but I love it." She moved closer, held his left hand and recited:

As sure as a vine grows round a tree,
I will cling to you, and you to me;
Heart to heart will our lives entwine,
My love to your love, and yours to mine.

Winters felt her hands grow firm upon his. Here was something strange and mysterious—a woman's love and tenderness. In contrast to these peaceful moments with Myra, his life had been stormy and full of peril. She had brought to him his only genuine happiness. She was a finished and perfect gem in a whole wilderness of rough and unsightly stones.

"That was mighty pretty, Myra," he said at long last.

Myra pressed her head against his shoulder. "It's nice of you to say so."

"I reckon I could say more'n that about you," Lee said with a glad, yet disturbed feeling. "I reckon there never was nobody quite so pretty as you are. Way I figure, you've got everything a woman's supposed to have, but where a woman's supposed to be good you're heaps better. Our getting married was for me not just finding

something I wanted, but only its beginning. Every day I find new wonders to be proud of. Without my lifting a hand, time weathers concealing things and reveals that my claim is a lode of pure gold."

"Oh, Lee!"

FOR DAYS thereafter he remembered that evening. On his lonely rides, he dreamed of settling down on a ranch, when he could expect more evenings like that. But he had never come to a good quitting place. Transgressors came on and on, a trickling stream, certainly, but one stained by human blood. How could he find a quitting place, when none was to be found?

He was riding home from Brazerville a week later with arrest notices in his pocket, when he recollected that light he had seen, far up on a mountain pinnacle. At first this recollection gave him shivers; then he thought of it soberly, even rebelliously. Up there undoubtedly was some sort of vulture's nest. On its lofty perch, it was more than a nest of evil; it was a grim symbol of crime's possible victory over him and that which he represented. It was a threat to his home, to Myra, to his friends, to people who passed their useful days within principles of law and right living. To Lee it was cause for anger and deadly resentment.

Shortly before midnight, Doc Bogannon was polishing glasses when his batwings banged inward.

"Winters!"

Winters strode up and slapped down a coin. "Wine, Doc."

Bogie looked startled. "Wine it is." He filled a glass. While Winters drank, he said, "Your mood's bad, Winters. Something serious?"

Winters surreptitiously drew a paper from his pocket and put it before Bogie. "Read it."

Bogie read, then sighed. "Well! Imagine Greenleaf Baytree committing mail fraud."

Winters sniffed. "You surprise me, Doc; murder of three mail-order wives meant nothing, I reckon."

Bogie murmured, "Face my guests while we talk and you'll catch onto something."

Winters faced about and sipped wine. Often had he and Bogie smoked out some unsuspecting criminal. Winters asked his key question. "Business been good, Doc?"

Bogie polished a glass. "Fair, I'd say; you had any luck?"

This was Lee's cue, his place to mention money, a bait that seldom failed. "Yeah, Doc," he said offhandedly. "While in Brazerville, I collected two hundred dollars on a monkey I turned in last month."

"Ah!" Bogie exclaimed. "Not bad; but you carry too much, Winters."

Lee had caught a flicker of interest in a queer-looking face. "Doc," he asked casually, "what's become of our poet?"

"Poet?"

"Yeah, that long-haired feller."

"You mean Greenleaf Baytree? Well, sir, he hasn't been in for some time; probably moved to greener pastures."

There was a stir; that queer-looker Winters had spotted rose and came forward. He wore a black cloak, assumed saintly looks, and placed his hand on Lee's shoulder. "Did you inquire of our great poet Baytree?"

Winters shook off his inquisitor's hand. "Your hearing's mighty good, stranger."

Bogie put down glass and drying cloth. He'd played along with Winters quite gaily, but now he sensed danger. "My apology, Winters," he said nervously. "Meet my good friend Alexander Murdoc. He, too, is a poet; I overheard him say so. Stranger still, his is a man's body, but a woman's soul. He's divine Sappho reincarnate."

Winters had heard Myra read about an ancient Greek poetess named Sappho. "Right odd," he said dryly; "but where's our poet Baytree?"

Murdoc's smile was purity itself. "Baytree, sir, is my honored guest."

Winters set up his glass for a refill. Here was something ominous, one of those double-minded fellows who understood ordinary men, but moved, also, in mysterious and unfathomable realms. But this loony knew greed, a vice not limited to any class of mortals. He said, "You'd hardly believe it, Murdoc, but Baytree's wanted. Big reward."

Murdoc stared. "Astounding!"

"But, of course you wouldn't betray a guest."

"Guest! No such reprehensible imposter can be a guest. Betray him, indeed! I should strangle him. If you care to come—"

"Sure," said Winters. He put down his empty glass. "I'm right behind you, Murdoc."

Now Bogie knew fear. In such fashion had Baytree departed with Murdoc; Baytree had not returned.

Bogie rushed out. "Winters!"

But he was too late. They were riding eastward by moonlight. If they heard his call, they did not so indicate.

He went back uneasily and resumed his work, preliminary to his usual midnight closing.

AN HOUR later Winters and Murdoc stood before Time's Mytilenean Mansion of Divine Sappho.

"Yo-ho," Murdoc called loudly. He knocked and called again. "Open for your comrade and his guest."

Winters observed a heavy door and at its left a small, high window, aglow with lamplight. He heard noises, then squeak of hinges. Murdoc put a hand on Winters' arm to urge him forward, but Winters brushed it off and stepped behind Murdoc.

His voice was hard. "You first, Murdoc."

Suddenly Sappho's mansion door swung wide and three men in cloaks rushed out. They grabbed Murdoc.

"Come in and welcome," they shouted enthusiastically. But when they had dragged Murdoc in, they discovered their mistake.

"Ah!" one exclaimed sadly.

"Do not be discouraged," said Murdoc. "Our guest is modest, but he enters."

Winters stepped inside.

There followed renewed excitement and welcome, but when Murdoc's friends set upon him to strip him of hat, coat and valuables, Winters shoved them aside.

"Keep your hands off," he commanded angrily. "I'm no visiting grandma to be made over."

"You misunderstood," Murdoc told his companions. "But I'm sure Officer Winters will forgive you." Murdoc introduced them.

They bowed in mock humility. That one called Michel de'Angelo said, "We assumed he was a poet."

"Maybe I am a poet," said Winters.

"Winters certainly appreciates good poetry," said Murdoc. "I've heard him render excellent verse."

"Ah," said Michel. Apollo and Hermes likewise said, "Ah."

Winters stepped right and faced them. "Want to hear a poem?"

Their sallow faces sweetened.

"We'd feel honored," replied Apollo. "If you prove artistic, we might even admit you to our order."

Murdoc nodded to his companions. "Assume your seats as judges; you have a surprise coming."

Michel, Hermes and Apollo backed away, sat down and assumed expectant attitudes. "Let our candidate proceed," said Michel.

Winters cast about warily. His breath caught, though he betrayed no alarm. Where he had entered, there appeared no door, nor any window. Certainly door and window were there, but cleverly designed to look like wall, with pegs upon which hung coats and hats.

At his back, however, there was a door of rough planks, plainly visible, at its right a small window. Winters chilled, yet sweat beaded and ran down his face.

"Our guest has stage fright," Murdoc observed suspiciously.

Winters sleeved his face. "Yeah, speeching always did scare me stiff."

Murdoc smiled craftily. "We quite understand; nevertheless, please proceed."

Winters squared his shoulders, maintained tense alertness. He recited his coon-dog verse, then waited uneasily.

His judges looked at one another, nodded and rubbed their chins in open-mouthed delight.

"Amazing!" exclaimed Hermes.

"Divine!" declared Apollo.

"Out of this world," said Michel de'Angelo.

WINTERS concealed rising anger with difficulty; his recent scare roused smoldering ferocity. Respecting these monkeys, he had said nothing to Bogannon. But Marshal Hugo Landers at Brazerville had given him their story; they were insane scoundrels who would have murdered for a horseshoe nail.

Winters said with feigned conceit, "Want to hear another?"

"Oh, yes," his judges answered.

Winters recited Myra's favorite verse. Their enthusiasm wilted then.

"Inexpressibly trite," said Michel.

"Sickening sentimentalism," said Apollo.

"Sloppy," said Hermes.

Michel said, "Had you been content with your first offering, we might have accepted you into our society, but that second piece spoiled your chance; we would bid you goodnight, sir."

Winters' face hardened. "You don't disappoint

me none. But you'll have questions to answer, unless you tell me mighty quick where Greenleaf Baytree is."

Murdoc resumed his role as host. "It's most disappointing, Winters, but Baytree obviously has disappeared." He glanced at his comrades.

Michel nodded. "Yes, he left today."

"Just after noon," said Apollo.

"Being angry at us, he will not return," said Hermes.

Winters backed up. His hand reached behind, unlatched and opened their only visible door. He said coldly, "Baytree won't come back, if he's smart; in my opinion, this is a buzzard's nest."

Murdoc stood only a few feet away, set to give him a push. His expression was anxious, crafty. "Winters, to me it seemed we had one common interest, that of ridding ourselves of a criminal, but I regret having extended hospitality. Therefore, goodnight."

"Going will suit me better than you," said Winters.

He turned as if to take abrupt leave, but stopped and shrank back in pretended fright. From an eye corner he saw a shadow move; he heard quick sounds behind him. Swiftly he stepped aside, and as he did so Murdoc's body lunged past him. A terrifying scream tore from Murdoc's throat as he missed his objective and momentum carried him into empty space. That scream grew fainter each moment as he went down into cold and final darkness.

Winters had backed against a wall, six-gun in hand. "You monkeys are under arrest," he declared with restrained fury. "You are a pack of murderers, and you'll hang until your eyes pop out. Line up."

Whether they were bound by an hypnotic spell, or saw their doom in any event, they lined themselves in single file. Winters witnessed something then that gave him shivers. Those three cloaked and slender loonies marched straight ahead without pause. First Michel, then Apollo and Hermes stepped into emptiness and fell to their deaths without a whimper.

Winters bolstered his gun and sleeved his face.

Slowly he closed their treacherous door. Now that this latest crisis had passed, he felt weak. His hands trembled. He was so unnerved that he had to sit for a while. At their rustic table stood a crude chair. He sat there, and after many hazy seconds discovered a paper lying before him, beside it ink and quill.

On this paper, somebody had written a verse, possibly part of an unfinished poem:

Now we hang our lantern high,
That wandering souls may see its light
And come home. When death is nigh,
Give us, too, a twinkle in our night.

This, thought Winters gloomily, was something to remember. Poets were far beyond his ken, but of one thing he was sure: they could make a man think.