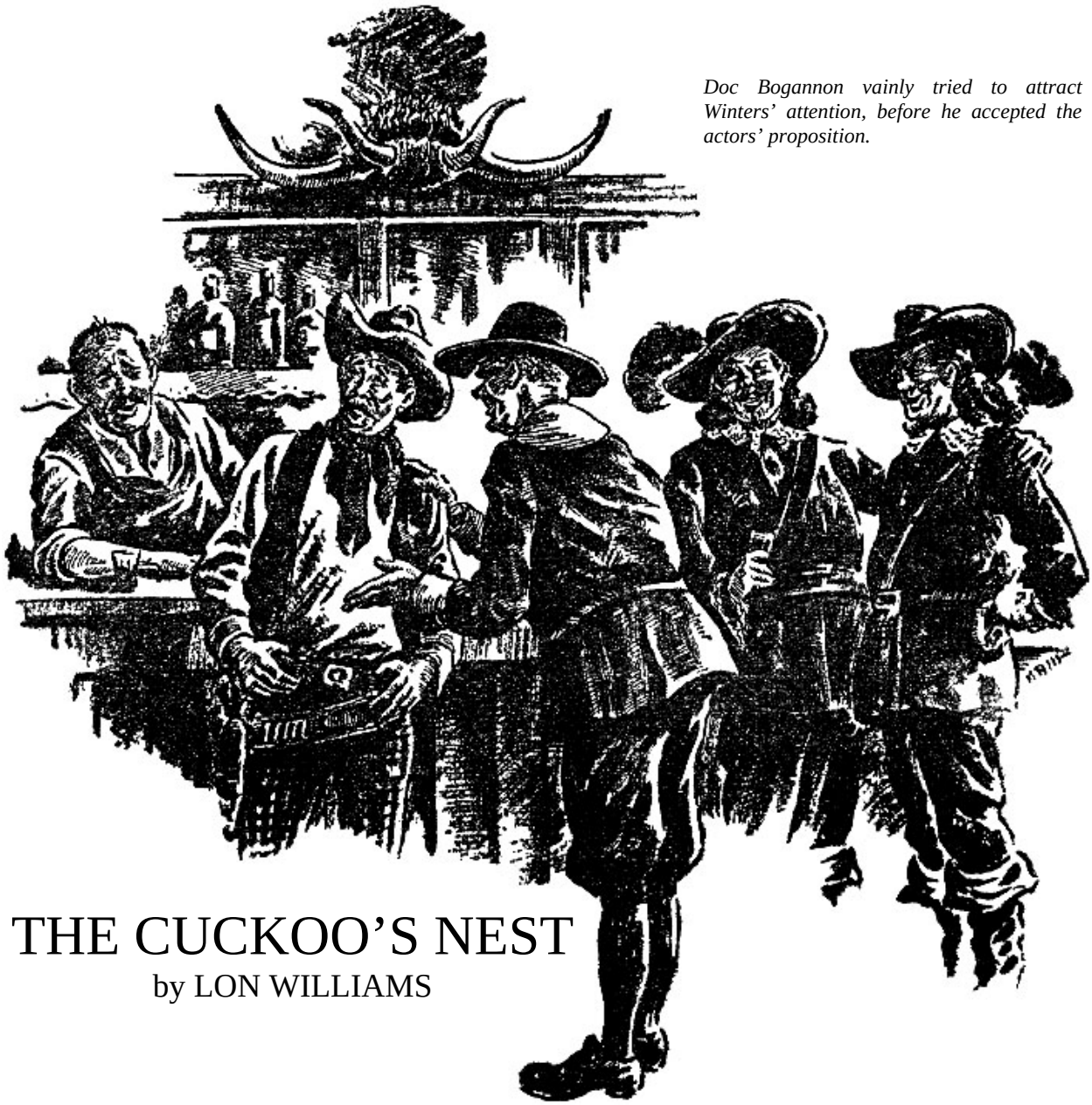
Real Western Stories, April 1956

This troupe of traveling actors were presenting a play dealing with the execution of King Charles the First of England at the hands of the Puritans. Lee Winters had heard about this struggle from the history books that his wife had read to him, and the actors certainly looked impressive dressed up in the costumes of Cavaliers and Roundheads. But they seemed to have trouble getting a man to play the role of the King—every man they picked seemed to disappear soon after. . . . Then Winters was selected to play the famous role. . . .



Doc Bogannon vainly tried to attract Winters' attention, before he accepted the actors' proposition.

THE CUCKOO'S NEST

by LON WILLIAMS

DEPUTY MARSHALL Lee Winters reined his horse Cannon Ball onto a shoulder of Brazerville Road and stopped. Behind him a stagecoach had emerged from Enloe Pass and begun descent of Walden's Ridge. Its driver yelled and whipped his four horses into a run. Winters made a quarter-turn to watch this foolhardy spectacle. Clatter of hoofs was accompanied by discordant singing:

"Boot, saddle, to horse and away!
Rescue my castle before the hot day
Brightens to blue from its silvery gray.
Boot, saddle, to horse and away."

Speeding horses and swaying coach rounded a

turn. Their driver and passengers spotted Winters and shouted greetings as they swept past. “Hooray! Hooray! Boot, saddle, to horse and away. Howdy there, stranger, and fare thee well.”

Winters stared, fascinated. There went a gilded coach of men out of storybooks—dudes in buttons and bows; plumed hats; shirts with ruffles and lace. Shades of King Charles and Oliver Cromwell! Winters’ wife, Myra, had a book on English history; those monkeys were right out of its middle.

They sped on. Their coach rocked; their driver whooped and swung his long whip. At a left turn, coach wheels skidded, and to Winters it seemed certain there’d be an over-cliff plunge. But they made it. Farther down they swept into view again. On their left a cliff towered high; on their right a precipice fell to shadowed depths.

At their next turn, one where no driver in his right mind would have exceeded a trot, horses leaned inward and swept on at a dead run. Coach wheels skidded and must have come within inches of disaster; but once more speeding horses, already safely round, saved their vehicle and carried it on out of sight.

Winters breathed freely again. Such conduct as he had witnessed could be explained only upon supposition that those masquerading Cavaliers and Roundheads were a bunch of cuckoos.

So now he had a new worry. If those fugitives from history designed to stop in Forlorn Gap, he hoped they’d change their minds, if any, and drive on to Kingdom-come. For him, cuckoos had always spelled trouble. He’d had about enough of trouble, too; in Brazerville he’d intended to resign. But, as usual, Marshall Hugo Landers had talked him out of it—for a little while yet.

He had a side trip to what had once been Monte Gaut’s ranch on Cracked Kettle Creek shortcut, where a black-bearded stage robber named Brogan was believed to be in hiding. This turned out to be a vain trip, for Blackbeard had already been slaughtered by parties unknown and left to rot in an old corral. Time thus wasted brought night, a ride through mountain gorges, alternate spells of sweat and chills, and increasing thirst for a stimulating drink.

IN FORLORN GAP, Doc Bogannon’s saloon had reached its early-evening peak of patronage. This semi-ghost town was a stopover place for men who disliked to encounter perils of night travel. It was also a sifting-out place for outcasts of Pangborn Gulch, Elkhorn Pass, and smaller gold camps crammed into scores of gulches in Forlorn Gap’s mountainous hinterlands. Then, too, there were tides of incredibles that flowed westward, drawn not particularly by gold fever but pulled into its wake and wash of madness nevertheless. Of these, fate cast many ashore in Doc Bogannon’s weird and ghostly town and incidentally brought them as customers to his saloon.

Doc, for some time, was too busy to take more than passing note of any individual patron. Poker players, who had not yet drawn their guns and laid them out handily, were calling for whiskey; it was an exacting job to catch up with calls. But at last it was done and Doc, relaxing behind his bar, observed a tall, top-hatted character who, he suspected, had been lying in wait for him, hoping to mooch a drink.

This character, long-haired, clean-shaven and thin, leaned against Bogie’s bar and surveyed card players and drinkers with a philosophical eye.

Doc bent forward and tapped his shoulder. “Something for you, my friend?”

There was a delayed, condescending response. “Sir, it is quite presumptuous of you to so address me. Only celebrities are privileged to call me friend. I am Wadsworth Jefferson Heath, actor of world renown, portrayer of Hamlet, interpreter of Aristophanes, idol of London and of every city of consequence in America. Yet you dare to touch me and demand if there is something for me!”

“My humble apology,” exclaimed Bogie.

Doc Bogannon himself was tall and large, with handsome face, high, broad forehead, dark hair, and friendly, understanding disposition. What had brought him to Forlorn Gap was his own secret; he lived with a half-breed Shoshone wife and to all appearances made his living as owner and operator of Forlorn Gap’s only saloon. One quality he possessed served him well when he was confronted by queer ganders like Wadsworth Jefferson Heath—he understood and found them interesting.

By way of appeasement, he said, “Now that I realize in what majestic presence I stand; may I have so great an honor as to present with my compliments a glass of wine?”

Wadsworth Heath squared his emaciated shoulders. “Now you speak as a true gentleman. I accept your apology graciously, and in recognition of your gentility, I shall also accept your proffer of

vinous libation." He added, as he lifted his glass, "Thank you, sir. And here's to great days and great dreams."

Heath drank, smacked his lips appreciatively, put down his glass and drew a handkerchief from his left sleeve. Bogie waited until Heath had dabbed his wet lips, then said off-handedly, "I don't suppose you happen to be a Boston Heath, do you?"

"No, my good man," Heath responded. He walked a few steps to right then back to left. He paused and tapped Bogie's bar with a tarnished, brass-headed walking stick. "But I have performed in Boston, sir; I've been toasted from Back Bay to Beacon Hill. 'Twas in Boston that my rendition of Hamlet brought from Harvard College an offer to confer upon me a doctorate and a chair as professor of dramatic arts, an offer which I, of course, respectfully accepted in part and declined in part." He strode back and forth, cast upward meanwhile a reminiscent eye, then paused and assumed a meditative posture. "To be or not to be, that is the question!"

He rushed back suddenly and banged with his cane. "Wine, sir. Wine, I say. An inspiration is about to come upon me. It is a moment that must not pass."

BOGIE LIFTED his wine bottle, but as he did so his batwings swung hard and a tall, wiry, weather-beaten man with a star on his vest stepped in.

"Winters!"

Winters strode up and planked down a coin. "Wine, Doc, and don't be slow."

"Winters, am I glad to see you!" Doc hastened to pour wine. "Didn't happen to see a ghost on your way in, I trust?"

"No, Doc, but I've got a feeling I'm going to see one." Winters glanced up and discovered himself being severely scrutinized by a beanpole in a top hat. Winters jerked his head. "Who's he, Doc?"

"Do pardon!" exclaimed Bogie. "Winters, meet my new friend, Wadsworth Jefferson Heath; he's an actor. Dr. Heath, my friend Deputy Marshall Lee Winters."

"Your friend," said Heath, "is a rude, disreputable hireling, a varlet and a knave. As on too many former occasions when magnificent inspiration was descending upon me, and some uncouth groundling dispelled and obliterated my terrific moment, so entered this dull and ill-mannered constable when greatness as of old was again about to be mine." he rapped sharply with his cane and once more strode grandly back and forth, shoulders squared, chin close to his chest, eyes a-glitter with dramatic ferocity.

"'Tis a rare sight, Winters," Bogie observed quietly. "Napoleon had a thought that fits it perfectly. *C'est non de loin genie a insense,* or words to that effect."

Winters twisted his mouth and said dryly, "My thought exactly." He drank his glass empty and set it down. "You know, Doc, this Wadsey Heath reminds me of a feller down in Texas when I was a yearling in Trinity Valley. Name was Highlander Fifoot. He was so stiff and straight that every witch and wizard for miles around was offended; finally they pooled their talents and changed him into a hoop snake."

"My, my," exclaimed Bogie. "Did they have to be so extreme?"

"I've often wondered about that, Doc. But ain't there something about desperate diseases requiring desperate remedies?"

"Well, yes, there is," said Bogie. "But I can't say I'd recommend theirs in all cases."

Actor Heath paused and confronted them, spread his scorn equally upon both. "I am no more affected by your cheap remarks than a lion is disturbed by a hyena's laughter; or a mountain, by its babbling brook; or time's relentless roll, by a feline yawn; or moon and stars, by a coyote's bark or an owl's discordant cry; or—"

Winters slapped down another coin.

"Doc, give Wadsey a drink, with my compliments, and good night." He left Heath orating and went out.

A glass of wine brought Heath's remarks to an abrupt pause. Once more he drank with elegance, once more neatly dabbed his lips.

Then Bogie's batwings swung again and a colorful procession filed in. Some wore hats with plumes, or with no more ornaments than plain band clasps. Some had high boots; some, silver-buckled slippers. Coats were red and black. They doffed their hats and bowed, whereupon their classifications were disclosed. Those with powdered, curly wigs, of course, were Cavaliers; those with close-cropped hair were Roundheads.

They crowded noisily up and demanded drinks.

Small coins clinked.

BOGIE EYED them curiously and, glanced at their money. He served his least-expensive rum. “Quite distinguished looking, you gentlemen,” he remarked. “Play-actors, no doubt?”

“That we are,” their leader replied promptly. “We are putting on a play in your fair city. It’s called *Cavaliers and Roundheads*. You, I presume know who Cavaliers and Roundheads are?”

“Oh, certainly,” replied Bogie. “You fellows had a right lively war with each other in dear old England many years ago.” He glanced at their leader. “You, I imagine, are Sir Thomas Fairfax, commander of Parliament’s New Model Army of that day.”

“That I am, sir.” He indicated a stocky, glum number at his right. “This gentleman is my second in command; Oliver Grumble, of course.”

“Oliver Cromwell,” his second in command corrected grouchily.

“Yes, of course,” said Fairfax.

Another said, “I am John Pym.”

Fairfax corrected him. “You are John Pym’s ghost.”

Others introduced themselves. “I,” said one, “am Lord Mayor of London.” Another, “I’m John Eliot’s ghost.” “And I am Laudy Laud’s ghost.”

“You are Archbishop Laud’s ghost,” said Fairfax.

“So you’re putting on a play in Forlorn Gap,” mused Bogie. “Far be it from me to discourage entertainment, but isn’t your subject over most of our heads? So few of us know anything about Cavaliers and Roundheads.”

That started a storm of protests and abusive words, but Fairfax quieted his noisy followers with a sharp command. “Silence, mutineers!” He faced Bogannon with vast patience. “Sir, action is understood by all. We give action; we wage heroic war against tyrants; we win great battles. We lay waste to half of England.”

Oliver Cromwell spoke grumblingly. “And we cut off a king’s head.”

That remark cast sadness over them. They emptied their glasses.

Fairfax said gloomily, “Alas, we are presently without a king. How can we put on our play without a king?”

Bogie’s glance at Heath was neither malicious nor deliberate. He said helpfully, “You need look no further. There is your answer—none other than Wadsworth Jefferson Heath himself.”

They all turned and stared at Heath. He returned their stares with a most disdainful and contemptuous eye.

“Heath!” Fairfax breathed in awe. “Ah, we would not suggest a role in our play for one so famous.”

“I have been listening,” said Heath with an arch of his brows.

Fairfax looked at his companions. “That’s encouraging; perhaps he would join us, after all.”

“An old trouper never loses his hunger for bright lights,” said John Hampden’s ghost.

Others nodded.

Fairfax and Cromwell conversed with their eyes.

Fairfax nodded and faced Heath. “Your greatness and renown make us timid—but, fortunately, our troupe is minus a character for its greatest role. Only that of king could be offered to you without infringing upon every requirement of respect. Sir, if you would only condescend to play as King Charles—” He left his thought suspended as one not worthy of pursuit.

“I fear we propose too much,” said Cromwell. “It is our society he disdains, of course. Not our entreaty, for he is of generous spirit. Our intimations respecting his royalty he naturally recognizes and fully appreciates. But—”

“I am listening,” said Heath loftily.

Fairfax looked at Cromwell and shook his head. “No. We dare not. We are overawed merely to have seen so great an actor as Wadsworth Jefferson Heath. I think we had best depart, Oliver.”

“Perhaps if we would attach apology to entreaty,” Cromwell suggested humbly.

One of Bogannon’s remote customers yelled, “Whiskey! Where’s that lazy barkeep?”

Bogie lifted an answering hand. “Coming, sir. Coming.”

He left his actor friends regretfully. When he returned, after unanticipated delay, they were leaving, Heath striding grandly in front, London’s pompous Lord Mayor going last—and taking with him one of Bogie’s half-empty rum bottles.

HEATH FOUND a coach-and-four awaiting him outside. He and his fellow troupers crowded in and were whirled away to Forlorn Gap’s abandoned and gloomy opera house. Though

it was but an empty shell, Heath found it had a stage, with scanty properties recently supplied. Candles furnished eerie light which gave to cobwebs overhead a ghostly look. Yet Heath laid his top hat aside, stroked his thick gray hair, and strode back and forth with pleasure, in his mind's-eye this gloomy place transformed into elegant vastness and filled with clamoring people.

"Ah," he said, assuming command, as he doubted not was his right, "this theater shall resound again and with praises of Heath. Set up your properties, underlings, and let us proceed to rehearsal, for time presses hard upon us."

"How truthfully he speaks," a voice said in monotonous accents.

Heath glanced round. "Who said that?"

"Oh," replied Fairfax, "that was merely John Pym's ghost."

"True, true," said Heath. "So we do have ghosts, naturally. And my role is that of King Charles. What scenes do we rehearse tonight?"

Fairfax and Cromwell stood close together. They made signs with their eyes and nodded.

Fairfax said, "We have rehearsed our lines, except for that final scene at Whitehall, where his late majesty King Charles is beheaded. That, we thought, should be a good scene for this present rehearsal."

"Agreed," said Heath.

Attendants arranged a chopping block and a hooded headsman stood by it with a battleaxe.

"A book," said Heath. "For just tonight, I shall read my lines."

"You don't have any lines," said Cromwell. "King Charles, you see, has already been tried and condemned to die. He may not, therefore, speak, for he is already dead in law."

"Fa!" scoffed Heath. "'Twould be no play at all without dramatic lines for such historic moments. That future years may revere his memory, King Charles should here achieve his hour of sublimity. If your play contains no lines for him, I shall fashion some."

"Of course," said Fairfax. "We do not object, do we, Oliver?"

"Not at all," said Cromwell; "even a king should have a last word of some sort."

"He gave *me* no last word," said a ghostly voice. "I, poor John Eliot, died a prisoner in London Tower."

"Silence, thou miserable ghost," shouted Fairfax. "We waste time." He stepped forward, paper in hand, and faced Heath. "Charles Stuart, erstwhile king, but king no longer, I hold here thy death warrant. It has been decreed that thou shalt die by having thy head severed from thy body."

HEATH FACED his imaginary audience. "Then you shall see a king who is not afraid to die. Men of common breed are destined to obey laws, not to make them. *A deo rex, a reo lex.* These villains here, and all who are responsible for what they do, shall be known in history as regicides. From every nook and corner in which they hide hereafter, they will be hunted down and slain. And thou, Cromwell, shall become anathemy and be called Grumble, and hands of another year and of another king shall dig up thy bones and hang them to a gibbet."

"Ooooo," moaned a voice, "he doth speak with prophecy."

"Methinks he's said enough," interposed Fairfax; "to thy chopping block, O Fallen One."

Wadsworth Jefferson Heath cast about disapprovingly. "That chopping block should be farther backstage. Attendants should be seen bringing in their head basket, but during this make-believe execution a low screen should hide it."

Cromwell nodded at Fairfax. "Carlos Rex has some mind after all, or he reads our minds. That is exactly how we planned it: A block, a screen to hide his comely head, a basket to catch it when it falls. Yes, indeed. We even have a leaden ball wrapped in cloth which will fall when its suspending string is cut, to give realism to our ghastly deed."

"Well planned," said Heath. "And I see your execution block is rather long from front to back, which leaves plenty of room for our headsman's axe to strike without peril to my priceless neck. That screen to hide my neck and head, a descending axe, its thud upon wood, and a falling weight, all will combine to produce a harrowing illusion. Sirs, it is marvelous."

"Brogdoom," shouted Cromwell, "bring in thy basket. And thou, black-hooded Logan Brodswig, see thou art not careless with thine axe."

"Soldiers," shouted Fairfax, "to thy work."

Two soldiers stepped in beside Heath and with halberds urged him toward his doom. He moved back and stood for a moment looking down. Logan Brodswig's chopping block at its forward end had

been covered with a clean white cloth. This, thought Heath meditatively, was a final and appropriate gesture of respect to one of royal lineage.

He said in mournful, yet defiant tones, "Of this day shall England forever be ashamed. Today a king dies, only to become immortal. For a poet will hereafter note that upon this unseemly block King Charles *bowed his comely head down as upon a bed*, and a Shakespeare will weep because they could not kiss *this* dead Caesar's wounds *and dip their napkins in his sacred blood*."

A voice moaned, "O woe is me."

Another cried, "On with justice! He was a tyrant. Let him die."

"Enough," said Cromwell. "Hush thy ranting, Charles Stuart, and accept thy fate manfully. Perhaps then somebody will remember that you were not a coward, as well as a despot."

"Alas," said Heath, "no man can resist his fate. Die, then, bravely, royal Charles." Heath knelt and put down his head, making sure it and his neck were properly screened from his imaginary audience. He said aside to headsman Brodswig, "Have a care, varlet. If you so much as scratch me, I'll put a hot derringer slug in your gut."

He raised his voice then. "Strike, thou dark, infernal headsman. Has fear paralyzed thine arms? Doth thy dull brain reel before enormity of this crime thou art about to commit?"

Cromwell stepped backward to where he could see details of what was about to happen. "Brodswig, do your duty."

Heath, whose face was toward his executioner, watched proceedings with a contemptuous eye, at last despising this wretched role he was playing and thinking of his fellow troupers only in terms of scorn. Brodswig spat on his hands and gripped his battleaxe by its handle. He swung then like a woodchopper trying to split a knotty stick of dogwood; his axe subscribed a great arc and descended with a wham!

Heath's mouth opened in such astonishment that it never closed. It had been his head, and not a leaden ball, that dropped with a thump.

"Oh, misery!" exclaimed Fairfax, turning his back and walking away. "Now we've got to go and find us another king."

Cromwell waved his arms up and down. "At this rate, we'll never put on a play."

"What we need," said Fairfax, "is an idea. Possibly a king with a neck of iron. Or an axe that is not so sharp."

"Or," said London's Lord Mayor, "a headsman who is not so strong."

"Something must and will be done," said Cromwell. "No problem is insurmountable, once it is assailed with intelligent purpose."

"Then," declared Fairfax, "we shall so assail it."

FOR DEPUTY WINTERS, his being at home before midnight was an especial treat. It gave him a hot supper with his wife and time after supper for pleasant conversation, or reading. Myra Winters, in addition to beauty, had good taste for words and an eager, retentive mind. She had an extraordinary liking for history, and Winters—being chief beneficiary, next to Myra herself, of her extensive reading—had glimpsed worlds and eras he'd never before known existed.

Her present excitement, however, had only incidental relation to history. She said, as she filled his cup with coffee, "Lee, do you know what's coming to town?"

"No."

"A play, Lee. Imagine!"

"Hmmm," he mused. He remembered a stagecoach of loonies in bright clothes of past centuries. "What's this play called?"

"*Cavaliers and Roundheads*."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Well, collar that!"

"Why? Have you seen it somewhere?"

"No, but I've seen them that's in it."

"Really? What did they look like?"

"Like Cavaliers and Roundheads."

"Now, Lee!"

"Well, did you expect them to look like barn owls, prairie dogs, or something?"

"Of course not. I was merely thinking of their beautiful costumes and how I would love to be in a play."

Winters lifted his eyebrows. A vision of Wadsworth Jefferson Heath formed in his disturbed mind. "Myra, was there ever any crazy people in your family?"

"Lee, you should be ashamed."

He passed his cup for more coffee.

"As Doc Bogannon would say, my humble apology. Reason I asked was, there's been no cuckoos in my family except one of ma's uncles by

marriage. He was an actor."

"Actors are not crazy," insisted Myra. "They're just different."

"Ummm," said Winters. "Anyhow, after supper I want you to read me some more about Cavaliers and Roundheads. Did they have a song that went, *Boot, saddle, to horse and away?*"

"Certainly. It was a song of Prince Rupert's cavalry. Rupert was with King Charles, hence a Cavalier."

WHEN SUPPER and dishes were over, Winters replenished their fire and listened to Myra's reading. He had, he'd discovered, an extremely imaginative mind. When Myra read of battles, like Naseby and Marston Moor, he visualized great numbers of men, horses, guns, swords, and noise and smoke of war. Mention of victory brought up scenes of chaotic flight, with pursuers cutting men down without mercy. And when she read about King Charles having his head chopped off, he verily saw it fall and heard it thump, so excited was his imagination.

"What a clumsy way to die!" he exclaimed.

"What a beastly way to treat a king!" exclaimed Myra.

As she continued her reading, Winters grew drowsy. Her history recounted other beheadings, and in his mind he saw heads falling and rolling down a chute. He began to dream, and then he saw a head that looked like his own. It had bounced, and now it rolled—a head with dark, curly hair and a smoky, drooping mustache. He grabbed it as it was about to get away and set it back on his shoulders.

He heard Myra's voice. "Lee, wake up. And why have you got your hands on your head like that?"

His eyes popped open. He stared round and blinked. "I guess I was scared I might lose it."

"No wonder, after all that reading," said Myra. "Anyhow, it's bedtime."

For three days thereafter Winters pursued his trade of hunting down wanted monkeys. On his latest excursion he went as far as a hideout at Lost Creek Junction on Brazerville Road, but all he saw was a flock of buzzards wheeling low over canyon country toward Lost Creek. As he wasn't looking for anything dead, he turned back and arrived at Doc Bogannon's saloon two hours after dark.

"Winters!" exclaimed Bogie, as his batwings swung in.

Winters strode up in good spirits and spun a coin. "Wine, Doc."

Bogie grabbed a bottle. While he poured, Winters took a quick glance around. What he saw made his eyebrows fly up.

"Winters," said Bogie, "meet a collection of gentlemen out of storybook land. Sir Thomas Fairfax, commander of Parliament's New Model Army; Oliver Cromwell, his second in command; his Excellency, Lord Mayor of London, along with supernumeraries and various and sundry ghosts."

Winters looked them over coolly. "Yeah," he said. "Play-actors, I hear."

"You are so right," said Fairfax.

"And you're going to put on a play in Forlorn Gap," Winters said dryly.

"Right again," said Cromwell.

"Then why don't you?" said Winters.

"Ah," said Bogie, "they can't."

"No?" said Winters.

"No, Winters. They need somebody to play King Charles." Bogie poured himself a small drink and wiped his spacious forehead. "They've been insisting that I would make a fine King Charles."

"He would," said Cromwell; "I don't know when we've cut off a finer head."

Bogie gulped and spewed wine from his nose. "That's it!" he wheezed. Then he fell to coughing. When he was through, somebody yelled for whiskey. "Coming," he responded.

WINTERS emptied his own glass and set it down. When he faced round again, Sir Thomas Fairfax was gazing at him.

"Oliver, we've found him."

"Found him?"

"A new King Charles."

"You mean Officer Winters?"

"I mean none other. With a powdered wig, powdered whiskers, a long coat and ruffled shirt, he would make an excellent Charles."

Cromwell rested his chin on his right fist and scowled. "I don't know about that, Sir Thomas; we need an actor who can strike a pose."

"A regal pose, you mean."

"Yes, a regal pose."

"But after a rehearsal, he might surprise you."

"Yeah," said Winters. "I just might."

"You mean you will join us?" said Fairfax.

"Why not?" said Winters; "I've nothing to lose

but one head."

"Hooray!" shouted a ghost. "Our numbers increase."

They surrounded Winters and went gaily out, followed by London's Lord Mayor with a half-empty wine bottle.

Doc Bogannon saw them leaving and rushed back from waiting on customers. "Winters!" He ran outside. "Winters!"

But they were piling into a stagecoach. Its driver swung his whip, and coach, horses and actors rumbled away.

Bogie yelled, "Winters, come back!"

But they kept going. Within these past few minutes, Bogie himself had passed through an onset of flattery and persuasion. Those actors had been fascinated by his head, had remarked on what an excellent one it would be for purposes of execution. Now he believed they'd meant it. He remembered a pompous Wadsworth Jefferson Heath who had gone with them and failed to return. There'd been a shouting, ranting reformer who'd come into his saloon and preached a sermon; he, too, had gone to act as King Charles. They had Winters this time. They'd cut his head off, too.

Bogie wiped his face on his apron, shook his head and went back inside. He could never tell Lee Winters anything.

Winters, packed into a coach with whooping, singing lunatics, regretted his failure to heed Doc's warning. He was more a prisoner than a fellow trouper. These monkeys in gay clothes were too happy to suit him. In his opinion, they were a bunch of killers—homicidal maniacs who'd escaped from some prison.

At Forlorn Gap's abandoned theater they tumbled out and rushed in to do their rehearsal. They swept Winters along in their rush. London's Lord Mayor tried to hoist Winters' six-gun but got his knuckles cracked by Winters' hard fist.

Winters found a stage already set, with chopping block and accessories. Sir Thomas Fairfax handed him a book.

"You have only one line, King Charles." He indicated with a finger. "There's where it is. You ask permission to speak, but you are told that having been sentenced to die you are already dead in law and may not speak. Then you lay your head on Brodswig's execution block and have it cut off. Of course, this block is fixed so it only looks like your head is being cut off. Actually, he only cuts a string and a lead ball drops behind a screen. Ready?"

Winters backed against a wall. "No. I never learn nothin' except by first watching how somebody else does it. You go ahead and show me."

"What!" exclaimed Fairfax. "Me? Have my head cut off?"

"Of course, it won't actually be cut off," said Winters.

Fairfax turned to his second in command. "Oliver, you will have to show him how it's done. He says he learns only by example."

"Who?" said Cromwell. "You mean I'm to play King Charles?"

"Oh, no," said Fairfax. "You are going through his act, so Winters can see how it's done. In fact, as your superior officer, I order you to."

LONDON'S Lord Mayor stepped forward. "My dear sirs, you forget history. It is Grumble who rises to ascendency and lords it over England. I say it is Fairfax who should demonstrate."

Fairfax and Cromwell rubbed their chins. They looked at London's Lord Mayor, then at each other. They conversed with their eyes, and nodded.

"Correct," said Fairfax. "It is London's Lord Mayor who shall show our new King Charles how his role should be played."

Winters looked on while men with drawn swords used persuasion. Their protesting Lord Mayor at last yielded. When all was in readiness, Fairfax read his death warrant and headsman Brodswig swung his axe.

Winters' eyes almost popped from their sockets. "Why you murderers!" he shouted. "You did cut his head off." He whipped out his six-gun. "You're all under arrest."

Fairfax looked at Cromwell.

A ghost cried, "Boot, saddle, to horse and away!"

They fled then like scared rabbits, presenting only their backs as targets. Winters, dumbfounded, watched them run; he'd never been able to shoot at a man's back. Within seconds they were gone. He heard their stage driver yell and crack his whip. Thudding hoofs and rumbling wheels sped northward into Pangborn Road.

Winters recovered from his trancelike astonishment and paralysis, holstered his gun, took one parting look at London's decapitated Lord

Mayor, and set out afoot for Bogannon's saloon. He'd left his horse there, tied to Bogie's hitch rail.

DOC BOGANNON was behind his bar, uneasily polishing glasses. He looked up when his batwings swung in; his face lost its gloom. "Winters!"

Winters strode up and eased down a coin. "Wine."

Bogie filled a glass. "Winters, you look sort of quiet. Maybe you don't like being an actor."

"Yeah, Doc. Maybe I don't."

Bogie put down his bottle and snapped his finger. "My apology, Winters; there's a letter for you. Came today." He handed Winters a long envelope postmarked Brazerville. "From Marshal Hugo Landers, no doubt."

Winters stared at it, then opened it and read, *Dear Winters: A theatrical troupe playing Cavaliers and Roundheads at Lost Creek have been murdered between Lost Creek and Lost Creek Junction. Their naked bodies were found in a pile, most eat up by buzzards. A gang of loonies are under suspicion. Watch for them. Yours truly, Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

He handed Hugo's letter to Bogie. "Read it, Doc."

Bogie read silently. Suddenly sweat popped on his face. "Winters! They were here—right here."

"Yeah," said Winters, taking his letter back. "As I remember, they wanted to make you a king."

Bogie ran a finger round his collar, which had grown uncomfortable. "Scares me to think about it."

Winters emptied his glass and backhanded his mustache. He stared at Bogie's neck and grinned. "Opportunities like that don't come often, Doc. And you'd have made such a fine King Charles."