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THE WATER CARRIERS

Lee Winters Story
by LON WILLIAMS

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters rode leisurely down Forlorn Gap's silent main street, in dread of a letter he hoped had not come. Lately his mind had been troubled by a sense of impending peril. Sooner or later, he reflected gloomily, a crisis would come from whose fatal decision he could not escape. Myra's books inspired in him nightmarish thoughts; even more disturbing were Forlorn Gap's empty, gaping houses, eerie noises and pervading loneliness. It seemed to him—especially when he rode alone—

that he lived in a world where he did not belong, or in a time long departed.

This feeling of unreality sometimes made him think that possibly he had already died before some wanted monkey's smoking gun, and rode now as a ghost of his former self. Possessed as he was of a surprisingly imaginative mind, strange creatures haunted him when he was alone with his thoughts. Unusual excitement—particularly that caused by singing lead from a badman's gun—tended to carry him as an aftermath into regions of fantasy. There

he had strange company, especially of a kind described in his wife's stories. Some of these were pagan divinities. Some were human. Others were odd mixtures, unheard of except in legend.

But Doc Bogannon's saloon looked familiar. When he hitched his horse Cannon Ball and strode in, Bogie's greeting sounded as real as it had ever done before. "Winters! You're early, Winters, but come in and welcome."

Bogannon was large and intellectual in appearance. In contrast to Winters' wiry, weather-beaten, unimpressive stature, Doc looked like a statesman too soon retired from leadership and momentous councils. In Forlorn Gap he lived with a half-breed Shoshone wife, and operated this one remaining saloon as his only visible means of support. His past was his own secret, which he kept even from his trusted friend Winters.

Lee dropped into a chair by a table. "Wine, Doc, and I hope that's all you've got for me."

"Wine it is, Winters," Bogie responded sadly; "otherwise, however, I must disappoint you." He came round with a bottle and two glasses. As he poured wine, he dropped an envelope beside Lee's glass. "Midnight stage from Brazerville."

Winters read his letter first, then downed his drink. "It's from Marshal Hugo Landers, Doc."

"Directing you to arrest two wanted monkeys, no doubt."

"How did you know that?"

"They were here an hour ago. I had just opened for business when in they walked, a blond curly-head and a lean one I couldn't have distinguished from you at fifty paces. Two-gunners, Winters, with looks of killers in their eyes."

"New names among fugitives," said Winters. "Dorcas Adfield and Cain Hargis. Hugo's letter describes them as you did. This time he wants them dead. Robberies and murders. Which way did they go?"

Bogie refilled Lee's glass and lifted his own. "Winters, let's have a nip together." He drank lightly and put down his glass.

WINTERS detected uneasiness in Bogie and his own worries increased in consequence. "Doc, what's on your mind?"

Bogie turned to look at something far away. "I was just thinking, Winters. I know you don't believe in ghosts; neither do I. Yet—now and then, odd sensations betake me. At such moments I'm

reminded of a verse. I don't know who wrote it. Could have been my own product, created, memorized, but its authorship forgotten. It goes like this:

"What is today, is itself but ancient lore;
Time that was is something that is yet to be.
Old events are not behind us, but before—
Our tomorrows seen through eyes of prophecy."

Winters emptied his glass, backhanded his mustache, got up and dropped a coin. "I reckon your poetry's got a heap of meaning in it, but it's over my head; now tell me which way those wanted monkeys went."

"I'm sorry you have to chase them, Winters," Bogie responded darkly. "But if you must, they headed southwest across Alkali Flat. I know you'll be careful; I'm hoping you'll also be lucky."

"Thanks, Doc."

Winters strode out without a backward glance. Some hours later he realized that he had not been careful—certainly not as careful as he should have been. Hoof prints had led him into a region of broken canyons, cliffs and dizzy, twisting trails. Just as he recognized that he had ridden into a high dead-end gulch, a voice snarled down at him. "All right, Deputy Marshal, here's where you end up your chasing what you call wanted monkeys."

Lee glanced up to right, then to left. Adfield and Hargis had him covered, one from either side; it was too late to turn back. Ahead were great rocks beyond which Cannon Ball could not carry him. Yet he spurred forward. Adfield and Hargis fired and ducked out of sight as Winters in turn flung lead at them. When he could ride no farther, he swung off and darted behind convenient rock shelter.

Then, to his amazement, a voice called softly, "Climb, Winters. Climb high."

He cast about uneasily, but he saw only Adfield and Hargis. They dodged from boulder to boulder, climbed as he climbed. Hargis, he observed with a weird sort of feeling, resembled him—so much so that he might have been a twin brother.

Adfield shouted, "You can't get away, Deputy Marshal; we figured you'd trail us. What you didn't figure was that we'd lead you into a trap."

They had him cornered, that was certain. Adfield was coming up on his left, Hargis on his right.

Again that voice called softly, "Turn back, Winters; then hide and wait."

He was mystified and scared; but a quick glance round showed him that if he went farther, he would be exposed to both of his enemies. If he stayed where he was, they'd ease up and pick him off at their pleasure. He turned back quickly, dropped under an overhang and lay still.

A few seconds later, Hargis appeared. He moved stealthily round a rock. Then, as a bullet hit him, he stiffened.

"Dorcas!" he screamed in shocked anger.

"Cain!" Adfield responded, horrified at his mistake. "I didn't know it was you." He scrambled over a rock and rushed forward to assist his wounded companion. "No! No!" he screamed as Hargis, moved by surly vengeance, beaded on him.

"You said you'd get me someday," sneered Hargis, "but I'm taking you with me, like I said I'd do." His gun smoked, and he and Adfield continued to blaze at each other until both crumpled beyond further harm.

WINTERS crawled from his hiding place, searched their clothing, found them loaded with loot from their recent crimes. With that—and such papers as they had which would be useful for identifications, along with their guns and belts—he descended to Cannon Ball, mounted, and started in a direction he thought was homeward.

But environment which had resembled scenes made familiar by his lonely rides began to change; once more he had that disturbed feeling of living as a stranger in another time. His trail led down into an amphitheater, or small meadow, where a stream flowed between banks of green grasses. A weeping willow grew there, its drooping branches alive in a cool breeze.

Thirsty of a sudden, he swung off his horse, lay flat and lowered his mouth to drink. So clear was this stream that the gold-flaked sand beneath seemed to lie uncovered. Yet his lips touched cold, refreshing water. Its effect was exhilarating. It had frightening results, too. While it changed him from a tired but victorious manhunter into a refreshed, reinvigorated individual, it transformed him, also, into an alert, bewildered victim of strange forces he felt, but could not see.

He sprang up, his only thought being to mount Cannon Ball and ride for his life.

But sounds stayed him. Searching eyes revealed

to him that he was near a spring, that sitting upon a flat ledge beside it were three young women, scantily dressed but amazingly beautiful. They were much alike, their distinguishing characteristics being their flower-garlanded heads. One's hair was black, another's golden, and one was like silver.

All three were crying.

One said, "He cannot help us; see how uncomely he is."

Another said, "Yes, I think we wasted our time in saving him from those men of evil who were about to kill him."

"We could give him a chance, however; it is plain enough that we accomplish nothing by our own efforts."

"Perhaps you are right, sweet Ina. Yes, Leta, Ina is right. We should give him a chance, though he does look unpromising beyond measure."

"Electa, I do not agree," said Leta. "Our hope has been that Apollo himself would come to our assistance. That uncouth creature there with his big horse could not possibly be Apollo in disguise; no, let us try once more, as we have done for so long."

"Once more, then," said Ina. She bent, admired her golden hair for a moment as beauty was reflected back to her, then dipped with a golden cup and stood erect, her cup brimming.

Electa bent, waited until ripples subsided and she could see her dark tresses, then dipped with a cup of stone.

Leta was last, of all of them most vain, as well as most beautiful. She rose at last with her cup of silver wet and shining. "Let us go," she said. "In my heart, pity and hope are again renewed. Why, I do not know. Possibly it is only a stratagem of cruel gods to make us suffer more when we fail."

They stood side by side for a moment, then marched away along a wide meadow path, each carefully holding her cup. Their course was toward another tree—this one five hundred feet away and, amazingly, laden with a wondrous variety of fruits.

NOW THAT he saw this second tree, Winters became aware of an incomparable fragrance that diffused itself from its branches. It was a great tree, with long limbs that bent earthward, borne down by their heavy loads.

What he next saw made him gasp. Underneath those fruit-heavy boughs stood a man of splendid physique, wearing only a loincloth. His skin looked

exceptionally fair, suggesting that he seldom walked except in shade. As Ina, Leta and Electa drew near, he turned from looking upward and extended his arms toward them.

When they were within a few steps of him, they stumbled and fell—and wept. Slowly they rose and returned, each cup held carelessly now, its contents lost. At their spring they sat down again and cried until it seemed their hearts would break.

Those gals sure have got their misery, thought Winters.

Suddenly Leta rose and came toward him, her silver hair ringed with a garland of blue flowers. She stopped when almost within touching distance of him and looked up, her blue eyes tearful with entreaty. “Oh, Winters, will you please help us?” she said unhappily.

“Help you?” he gawked.

“Yes, Winters. All these thousands of years we have tried in vain. It seems we can try no more—though try we must, I fear.”

“Try what?”

“Didn’t you see, Winters?”

She was joined by her two companions.

Ina’s green eyes swam before him like water-splashed emeralds. “We have been promised a deliverer—though whether mortal or immortal we are not told. Winters, though you look quite mortal, perhaps you are that promised one.”

“If I am, I never heard of it before.”

Electa’s searching eyes flashed darkly. “Then you are, indeed, a mere man and, I must say truthfully, not so heroic-looking as might be. Fate, I fear, is against us still.”

“You speak unkindly, Electa,” said Leta. “It is not expected that mortal men should be as comely as gods. But what have gods done for us? Nothing, except condemn us to a hopeless servitude for all eternity.” Again her eyes lifted in entreaty to Winters. “Won’t you please help us? We saved your life just now by causing those wicked men to shoot each other. Surely you owe us something?”

“I reckon I do,” said Winters, “but I ain’t figured out what you want done.”

“Oh,” said Ina sweetly. “So that is it? Haven’t you heard of an evil tree called Tantalus? And of Melos, most lovely of mortal men? And of Clymente, most beautiful of all maidens?”

Winters began to understand. “You’ve got it all mixed up,” he told them. “Tantalus was a man, not a tree.”

“Why do you speak so strangely?” demanded Electa.

“It’s that way in Myra’s book,” said Winters. “Myra is my wife’s name.”

Ina, Leta and Electa. “Is she not that beautiful one of Thebes, sought by so many suitors, and so hopelessly?”

“She’s a good looker, if that’s what you mean,” said Winters.

“Yes,” said Leta. “That’s what we mean. And she married *you*? Then you must, indeed, be some gallant hero, cast in this present uncouth form.”

Suddenly there came to them a sad, heart-breaking moan. “Water! Water!”

Leta’s eyes filled with tears. “Poor, poor Melos; he thirsts so dreadfully.” She turned away. “Come, dear ones, we must try again.”

Off they went. Once more they admired their reflections, then filled their cups and marched away. Once more, from some mysterious cause, they stumbled and fell; once more they returned weeping.

THIS TIME they confronted Winters in anger. “We expected you would be brave and heroic,” declared Leta.

“And grateful,” declared Electa.

“But you only stand and stare at us, and treat us as if you cared nothing for us and felt a pain at our torment.”

“You’re as unreasonable as any woman I ever heard talk,” stormed Winters. “Why are you so huffy all of a sudden?”

“Huffy?”

“Yes, huffy.”

Ina looked sadly at her empty golden cup. “I think he means to ask why we are angry.”

“Sure,” he snapped. “Why are you?”

“Well, because,” said Ina.

“Because you won’t help us,” said Electa.

“Because you just stand there and look, while we try in vain to carry a drink to Melos,” declared Leta. She turned and pointed with a lovely arm. “See how poor Melos stoops to drink from that pool at his feet? It is a spring called Blithe—which means to tempt, then to deny. Poor Melos is chained to a stone.”

“And,” said Ina, “Blithe rises cool and clear round his feet. But when he bends to drink, Blithe’s waters sink beyond his reach. Melos thirsts, but never drinks.”

“And when we try to carry water to him from this spring called Sheron, our feet are mysteriously entangled; we fall, and our cups are empty.”

“That’s a pretty howdy-do,” said Winters. “Why don’t you watch where you’re stepping?” He tossed a thumb toward Melos. “And why don’t he eat that fruit? Is it poison?”

“Ah,” Electa told him scornfully, “it is so little you know about things.”

“Hold on there,” Winters scolded. “I remember now. It says in Myra’s book that every time he reaches for fruit, a wind blows them upward out of reach.”

“Again your Myra’s book is in error,” declared Electa, her dark eyes flashing reproof. “Tantalus requires no wind to blow his fruit away. He is an evil creature with only thoughts of torture in his mind. Behold!”

As she pointed, Melos reached up to pluck what looked like a luscious yellow pear. He almost reached it; but as Melos rose on his toes, Tantalus lifted his heavy bough a little higher. What Melos had almost reached, he still could almost reach; but, stretch as he might, his objective moved until it was still just beyond his fingertips.

“That’s lowdown dirty-dog mean,” Winters declared angrily. “Even a man who’s done what Melos did don’t deserve to be tormented like that.”

“Oh, Winters,” cried Leta, “your anger is an equivalent of promise. Come, let us take you to Melos, where you can see more closely what his situation is and how grievously he suffers.”

“Fill your cups,” he directed authoritatively.

THEY HURRIED away. That time might not be wasted, all three bent as one and admired their reflections in Sheron. Then they filled their cups and marched side by side on their forlorn mission. Winters led Cannon Ball by a parallel route, his eye alternately on them and on Tantalus. In his opinion, Tantalus was a demon tree that had some things yet to learn about torture.

Ina and her companions began to chant softly, then to exchange small sighs of hope and happiness.

“At last, at last,” Leta cried softly, “I believe our work is near its ending.”

“Hold there a second,” called Winters. “I figure you’re going to fall down again. I want to see what’s causing it.”

They paused, and Winters moved ahead. A

strange thing happened then. Tantalus began to wave his branches, their violence of movement increasing as Winters advanced. Hissing sounds were to be heard, too, and murmuring growls as if countless predatory beasts were in hiding close by.

“Beware,” cried Leta. “Tantalus fears you; he will destroy you, if he can.”

“That’s no tree,” replied Winters. “It’s a devil who’s changed himself to look like a tree.”

Winters moved on until he was just beyond reach of Tantalus’ longest branches; there he paused for study. At Tantalus’ base, roots twisted and gnarled like tentacles. Some buried themselves; some ran along above-ground. These latter lay still, as roots of an ordinary tree that had become exposed by washing rains.

His interest shifted to Melos, whose gaze rested upon him wonderingly. Here was a youth too beautiful to be a mere man. With only a loincloth for clothing, he stood fair and tall, his hair pale gold that curled about his head, his eyes dark blue and saddened almost to despair. He stood upon a rock, to which his feet were chained. Around him stood a pool of clearest water, tiny ripples beating gently within inches of his feet.

“Winters, you have come at last,” said Melos, angry reproach rising in his voice. “Apparently time has meant nothing to you. Every day of your life, you have had water to drink; hence you know not what it means to die of thirst a thousand deaths. Though with water at my very feet, I cannot drink; with food over my head, I cannot eat. I hunger and I thirst without mercy. Yet you have come, Winters; for that you’re not to be denied some small measure of thanks.”

“Yeah,” said Winters. “But don’t think I planned it this way. In fact, I had nothing to do with it.”

Without warning something struck Winters a hard blow that knocked his feet from under him. By chance, however, he had seen a flash of movement. He knew then that those roots of Tantalus, which crooked along so seemingly inoffensive, were in reality animated arms, capable of movement so quick as barely to be seen.

“Alas!” sighed Melos. “Clearly you are not immortal. Moreover, I should unhappily say, not very wise; you permitted Tantalus to catch you off-guard.”

“Permitted nothing,” retorted Winters. “He didn’t ask if he could do that; in fact, he’s what I’d

call a dirty fighter.”

“For some reason he fears you, Winters,” said Melos. “Why he does so, I can’t imagine. As a hero, surely none more unprepossessing than you ever lived.”

“That brings us to a point,” said Winters dryly. “In my mind, from what I’ve heard about you, human conduct can get pretty low. It’s no wonder you’re being tortured.”

MELOS LOOKED down, sadly. “Ah, yes, Winters; what you say is true. In ordinary turns of life, it is well for a young man to be in love with a beautiful young woman. But one should never aspire to possess anything that a god has set his heart upon. It was my misfortune to love and be loved by beautiful Clymente, whom great, avenging Zeus had seen and desired. It was my worse misfortune to steal and hide her away, and make her mine before Zeus could lay his ruinous hands upon her. But for my folly I have paid, Winters. Ever thirsty, ever hungry, I am ever taunted by food and drink, both so near, yet so far.”

“Yeah,” said Winters. “That’s plain enough; but that story you tell is sure not how I heard it.”

“How did you hear it, Winters?”

“In my wife’s book, you was supposed to serve up a dish of stew for gods and goddesses made by boiling human flesh.”

Melos shuddered. “Horrors! But I can understand why such a slanderous story be told; those unfamiliar with Olympian gods and their cruelties could not have believed that I would be punished like this, merely because of young love.” Melos sighed. “But such is life. Provoke not jealousy in those who have power over you, nor covet anything that may rob them of a little glory. To do so is to invite ill-will and disaster.”

“You remind me of my pa,” said Winters. “When I was a yearling down in Trinity Valley, he said to me, ‘Son, don’t ever stick your head up, unless you want it to be shot at.’ And another thing he said, ‘If you don’t aim to be kicked around, learn how to shoot first.’ Melos, I reckon your education was sort of neglected.”

“You jest, Winters; you jest, while I am in torment from hunger and thirst.” Melos hung his head feebly, conscious only of his misery. A wandering breeze which caused ripples on Blithe’s crystal surface reminded him that water was all around him. Likewise Tantalus lowered his

branches until apples and plums dangled against his cheeks. “No,” said Melos. “I’ve been deceived so often and for so long, I can try no more.”

Winters, sensing danger, suddenly stepped backward. As he did so, a flashing object cut his chin.

In anger he remembered his forty-five. His hand closed upon it. “I don’t know what a dose of lead would do for you,” he said coldly. “But another pass like that from you, Tantalus, and I’ll find out.”

Melos glanced up as a tremor swept through suspended branches. He looked at Winters. “He fears you, Winters, as he might fear a thunderbolt from Zeus. I warn you, come no closer to him. To fear is to hate; to hate is to kill, if it can be done.”

“I’m catching onto him,” said Winters. He remembered then that he had come this close for a purpose—namely, to learn why Ina, Leta and Electa could never carry water to Melos. He glanced in their direction, found them waiting expectantly.

“May we approach now?” asked Leta.

“It would be no use,” Winters replied. “Wait a while.” He faced Melos again and gestured with his head. “Who are those ladies, Melos?”

“Ah, Winters, they, too, are being punished,” Melos answered. “Clymente, for no greater fault than that of being in love with me, was changed by Zeus into a white doe, to be chased by hounds and hunters over hills and valleys until I am free—which may be never. These three maidens, Ina, Leta and Electa, because they aided us to hide from Zeus for a season, are condemned by their pity and compassion to carry water in their cups in an unending effort to bring me a drink. Zeus, dear Winters, is resourceful, as well as mean.”

ONCE MORE, Winters was caught off-guard. His feet went from under him with such force that he landed on his head.

“Well, that done it,” he said, rising and adjusting his hat.

During his conversation with Melos, he had kept a wary watch on Tantalus. Meanwhile he had discovered what appeared to be some kind of center—something that resembled a bark-surrounded eye, below it a region of slow pulsation. With a movement comparable to that whiplash speed of Tantalus, he drew and fired.

Ina and her companions screamed.

Melos dropped low in terror.

What Tantalus did was truly terrifying. With Winters' first shot, that strange, bark-fenced eye disappeared. With his next shot, aimed at that region of pulsation, blood gushed out. Tantalus shuddered, his branches thrashed as if caught in a tornado. Roots drew up with screaming sounds and writhed like dying snakes. Violence rose to terrifying intensity and continued until every root was broken. Then, with moorings gone, Tantalus fell to earth. Leaves wilted, branches went limp; Tantalus lay in a lifeless mass.

Winters reloaded his six-gun. "Stand up, Melos."

In trembling amazement, Melos obeyed. "Yes, O Mighty One."

"Get your feet apart," snapped Winters. When Melos had obeyed, Winters took careful aim. Melos' ankle chains were united in a rock-embedded ring. It was at this ring that Winters aimed; he triggered, and ring and chains shattered like glass.

For seconds, Melos was unable to comprehend that he had been released from his long bondage. He looked at his unfettered feet, amazed, silent. He lifted a foot, raised it high, stared at it. He put it down and lifted its companion. Slowly, finally, he realized that he was free.

From his rock to shore was but a step. He made it in a grand, ecstatic leap.

"Melos!" cried Ina. She ran toward him, spilling water as she came. Her companions followed. One after another, they thrust their cups to his lips. Melos drank until all were empty; then their bearers ran for more.

While they were gone, Melos dropped to his knees and bowed his head before Winters. "O Mighty One, I humble myself—not in fear, but in thankfulness. May your life be long and blessed with peace."

"Come off that, Melos," said Winters. "I don't figure I've done anything special; whatever it was, you're more'n welcome."

Melos rose. He started to say something but hesitated, startled.

Where Blithe had formed a crystal pool, there became an emptiness, attended by gurgling sounds that receded away into cavernous darkness.

"Alas, Winters, what you have done is most special, indeed," moaned Melos. "You have lifted from me fetters imposed by Zeus himself. That, in Olympian eyes, is unforgivable. You must flee for

your life. Blithe, I fear, will return—not as a pool of clear water, but as something of unimaginable terror. Flee, I beg you."

"You could be right about that," said Winters. "But look there, Melos."

MELOS TURNED quickly and gave a glad cry. A short distance away stood a white doe, slender and of such animal grace as Winters had never before seen. Melos ran, leaping, and the two met in an exhibition of love and incredible transformation. It was not a doe that Melos embraced, but a young woman of great beauty.

Ina and her two companions had returned with their cups of water.

"Clymente," Ina sighed.

"Now," said Leta, "he will not thirst again."

Electa turned her cup and slowly spilled its contents. "We, too, are free. But we must leave this spot hurriedly; so angry will be mighty Zeus that Sheron will turn to boiling mud, and Blithe will become a fountain of scalding water and steam. All of this vast meadow will become a forbidding place, like unto nothing this side of Hades."

"Another thing," said Winters. "You'd better get clean out of these mountains; they're full of spooks."

"Spooks?" said Leta.

"That's what I said."

"I don't understand."

Winters turned to Cannon Ball and swung up. "If you don't understand what a spook is, it's beyond me to tell you."

"Wait," cried Electa. "You must not ride away believing us to be ungrateful. Here. This cup is all I have; I give it to you for remembrance. It is of amethyst. Drink your wine from it and, though your drink will never blind your eyes or disturb your mind, it will taste like nectar from Elysian fields."

"Now, look here," Winters protested, "you don't owe me nothing. If I've been any help, I was only too glad to do it."

"Do not refuse this one last request," begged Electa.

"Well, if it's a matter of principle with you, all right," said Winters. He accepted her gift and made room for it in his saddlebags.

"But wait," cried Leta. "My cup likewise is yours. It is of silver; so long as you keep it, you will receive good gifts."

"I've quit arguing," said Winters. He accepted

Leta's present.

"And mine," said Ina, her emerald eyes bright and entrancing. "This is a golden cup. With this as yours, you will always be generous. With it you will never want; for with every gift that you give will be planted seeds of love, and in return you will be many times blessed."

"Thanks, all of you." Winters stored their presents and gathered Cannon Ball's reins. A great longing to stay was upon him. He looked down at Ina, at Leta, at Electa. He thought how near heaven a man would be if all women were as beautiful as these.

As if they'd read his thoughts, they smiled and nodded gently.

"Farewell," they said.

From a mountain crag far away, a voice called urgently. They looked, saw Melos, and Clymente beckoning urgently. In a moment Winters was left alone.

He had no idea where he was. But Cannon Ball would know. A horse had more sense about some things than a man had. Winters kned him gently. "All right, horse, let's go home."

What began as an easy lope soon changed. Coming from behind him, Winters heard an unearthly blub-blub. Looking back, he saw a great pond of mud. From it rose tremendous bubbles and yellow vapor. Then where Blithe had been, a thunderous roar set in, soon to be followed by a gush of water and steam that rose hundreds of feet and spread as a seething white cloud.

"Horse, get out of here," cried Winters.

IN FORLORN GAP, evening lamps had glowed for a while, then most of them had been darkened. Doc Bogannon's customers had come and gone. He had reached up to extinguish his bar light, when his batwings swung in.

"Winters!" he exclaimed in pleased surprise. "Come in, Winters."

Heavy saddlebags in hand, Winters strode to a table and sat down. "Wine, Doc, and two glasses."

"Two it is, Winters," responded Bogie. He came round, sat opposite Winters and poured wine. He stared at his guest. "Pardon me, Winters, but you look as if you've been through something. That

blood on your face—you shot?"

Winters felt of his chin and discovered that blood had caked on its left side and on his neck. "No, Doc, I'm not shot. My recollection's sort of foggy, but I think I was struck by something like a whip."

"Something like, eh?" Bogie sipped his wine, then asked with unusual concern, "Winters, my interest for once is more than casual, but did you overtake Adfield and Hargis?"

"That's a way of putting it, Doc. What actually happened was, they overtook me; but they're both dead, if that's what you wanted to find out."

Bogie took a folder from inside his coat and removed a portion of its contents. He counted down one hundred dollars. "A token of my appreciation, Winters." He shoved it across. "Those two gents robbed me of two hundred dollars when they made that early morning call on me."

Winters shoved his money back. He reached down, opened one side of his saddlebags, lifted a goatskin bag of coins and shoved it to Bogie. "Your two hundred, Doc; those bozos hadn't been nowhere to spend it." He reached down again, this time brought up a new six-gun, its buckhorn handles inlaid with gold. "Hargis sent that to you, Doc. A token of his regrets."

Bogie's eyes widened. He received his gift and admired it with a layman's respect for a true craftsman. "Winters, I'm not ordinarily a lover of guns, but this one really takes my eye."

Winters reached down a third time. This time he gave a start. In his second saddle-pocket he espied three cups—silver, gold and amethyst. He arrayed them before Bogie's astonished gaze. "What do you think of those, Doc?"

Bogie was subdued with awe. "I can't believe what I see. Where could Hargis and Adfield have found such priceless things as those ancient libation cups? Winters, only in temples of Olympian Greece were their like ever seen."

"You guessed wrong, Doc. Adfield and Hargis never saw these. Three lovelies who carried water in them from a spring called Sharon gave them to me. Tokens of their appreciation."

