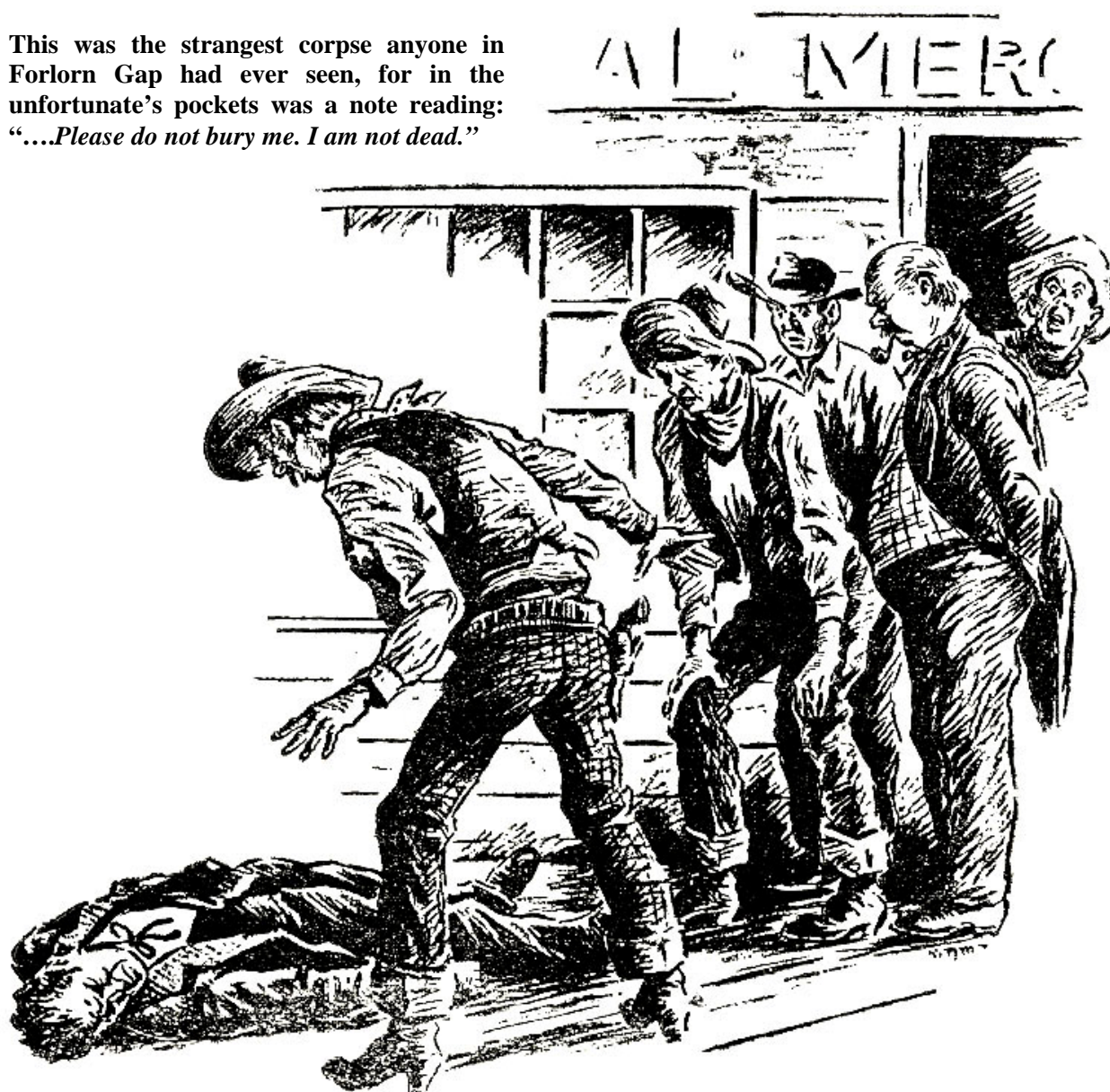


This was the strangest corpse anyone in Forlorn Gap had ever seen, for in the unfortunate's pockets was a note reading: "...Please do not bury me. I am not dead."



SUSPENDED ANIMATION

by LON WILLIAMS

D EPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters, office bound, tight-reined his horse Cannon Ball along Forlorn Gap's dusty main street. Meanwhile he lifted inquiring eyes toward mountains and low-hanging clouds. This, he forecast, was going to be one of those gray days

when home and fireside beckoned with especial allurements, when moments with his beautiful wife Myra, domestic peace, and smells of cooking contrasted sharply with those days that were filled with danger and death scenes. Fortunately, no arrest warrant had come his way recently; no

wanted monkey was currently on his list. Unless something had come from Brazerville at midnight, he could make his morning call at Doc Bogannon's saloon and go back leisurely to his own house.

Thoughts of tranquility were disturbed, however, when he saw men clustered near Pepper Neal's general store. Arrived alongside, he pulled up and peered over their heads. "What you men got surrounded there?" he asked, hoping it was nothing that required his attention.

Faces turned. Two or three gold-diggers nodded. "Morning, Winters."

Big Moss Tyner announced gloomily, "We've found somebody dead, Winters."

"Yeah?" said Winters. "Who is he?"

"Nobody here knows him," replied Tyner. "I'd say he was froze stiff, only it ain't quite freezing weather."

Winters swung down. What he found confirmed in part what he'd heard. He was neither coroner nor undertaker, though by common consent duty developed upon him to investigate. "Sort of little feller," he observed casually.

This little feller looked to about twenty-five years old. He was thin, his nose pointed, his eyes closed. Thick, dark hair carried signs of careful attention, even fastidiousness, with its straight left-side part, meticulous trimming, and gloss from brush strokes. His suit was dark, his shirt white.

"Looks like he's been dressed and laid out for burial," said Tyner.

"Only," said another gold-digger, "whoever fixed him up forgot to pull his boots off."

"Undertaker been here?" asked Winters.

"No," somebody replied, "but he's on his way right now."

"Alpha Omega," Moss Tyner called over intervening heads, "this ought to be easy for you. Here's one already got his Sunday clothes on; you can plant him as is."

Gloomy, lanky Omega, Forlorn Gap's long-chinned merchant-undertaker, shoved in, open-mouthed. "Who is he?"

Winters squatted and began searching pockets. Bill-book and fifty dollars showed up promptly; he handed them to Omega. "At least you won't have to bury him for nothing."

"Ah," sighed Omega. "Fifty dollars will put him away nicely."

Further search brought forth something of considerably more interest. "Letter," said Winters.

"What's it say, Winters?" gold-diggers asked.

Winters spread it open and read it aloud. *To whom it may concern. My name is Allday Widowalk. Please do not bury me. I am not dead.*

"Be-confound!" Winters exclaimed; "he's sure stiff enough to be dead."

OMEGA MADE his own examination, straightened and rubbed his hands. "This corpse ain't fooling nobody but hisself; how about some help, you men?"

Omega and two miners took hold. Omega walked behind, hands under Widowalk's head, his assistants going before, grips on Widowalk's ankles. They carried him into Forlorn Gap's only morgue, adjunct to saddle and hardware store, and laid him down on Omega's long work-table.

Winters was among those who followed. This corpse that requested not to be buried had him worried. With any movement, ever so slight, which might have indicated that life was still present.

"He's dead, all right," said Moss Tyner. "Notice how they carried him? It was like carrying wood."

"Of course he's dead," said Omega. "Everybody out now; I'm going to fix him to be put under."

Out they went, all except Winters and Omega. Winters hung back in Omega's store for words he tried to sound authoritative. "Alph, you ought not bury that body. If you do, and it turns out he ain't dead, I might have to arrest you for murder."

"Now, see here, Winters," Omega returned shortly. "No dead body ever fooled me."

"How would you know?" demanded Winters. "Did you ever dig one up afterwards to see if it had turned over or not?"

"Well, no, I never did."

"Maybe you've been burying people alive."

Omega squeezed his chin, then shook his head angrily. "Now, look here, Winters, I've been in this business long enough to know what I'm doing. I say that corpse is dead. I aim to bury him, and I don't aim to dig him up afterwards to see if he's turned over."

Winters had held onto Widowalk's letter. "Why do you figure he wrote this, Omega? Explain that, if you're so sure he's dead."

"What proof have you got he wrote it?" Omega countered irritably. "Winters, you're interfering with my business; it's my job to put him under ground, and there's where he'll be put, dead or alive. If he ain't dead he ought to be, seeing his

condition.”

Winters was not satisfied. “I reckon there’s ways of telling whether he’s dead or alive, ain’t they?”

“Name some.”

“Stick pins in him; if he’s alive, he’ll bleed, won’t he?”

“All right,” Omega agreed. “Come along; we’ll do just that.”

They went back into Omega’s morgue.

Winters immediately forgot about sticking pins in him. “Hold on,” he said. “Something’s happened here.”

Omega scowled unpleasantly. “Winters, nothing’s happened; you’re just trying to knock me out of some profitable business. You know, as well as I do, this man’s dead and stiff.”

“I know something else,” said Winters. “This here corpse has swapped ends with hisself.”

“Winters, I don’t like to dispute your word, but you’re mistaken.”

Winters shook his head. “No, Alpha, it’s you that’s mistaken. When we left this corpse five minutes ago, his head was east. Now it’s west.”

OMEGA LOOKED startled, but quickly recovered composure. “Winters, this corpse is exactly like we left him. His head was west; it’s still west. I never lay ‘em so’s they face sunrise. Now, sir, I’ve had enough of your interference. You know how to run your business. I know how to run mine. I’ll thank you to get out of my store.”

“All right, Alpha. But I’ve got this to say: If he moved, he ain’t dead.”

“Absolutely; I agree to that. And if he’s dead, he didn’t move. Now let that settle it.”

“That settles it for now,” said Winters. “It ain’t settled for keeps—not if you bury him alive.”

He strode out and swung onto his horse. In no time he was swinging off in front of Doc Bogannon’s.

Bogannon, owner and operator of Forlorn Gap’s only remaining saloon, had excited customers—gold-diggers, all of them. This was unheard-of, they declared.

“Why,” exclaimed one, “that corpse was as stiff as this bar. Dead as four o’clock, I’d say. Did you ever hear of anybody being stiff and not dead?”

“Well, yes,” replied Bogannon. “I’ve heard of men being scared stiff.” With easy motions he replenished their glasses. Bogie himself was large,

handsome, distinguished looking. He added soberly, “I’ve also heard of men being stiff drunk.” He paused as his batwings swung in. “Winters! Come in, Winters.”

Winters strode up and planked down his usual coin. “Wine, Doc.”

“Wine it is, Winters.” Bogie poured promptly and arched his eyebrows. “I hear something new and extraordinary has hit your fair city, Winters.”

“If I may borrow one of my wife’s words, Doc, it’s nothing to be facetious about.”

Bogie’s face elongated itself. “Of course not, Winters; my apology.”

Winters flung down Allday Widowalk’s letter. “Read that, Doc.”

Bogannon picked it up and read it. “Hmmm!” he mused. “This could be serious.”

“Do you mean it’s possible?” asked Winters.

“Possible that he’s dead, yet not dead?”

“Sort of, yes.”

“I’ve read of such,” said Bogie, furrows on his forehead. “As I recall, it’s described as suspended animation. Outwardly it’s death; yet by some strange prohibitive, disintegration is held in abeyance. Of course, I’ve never died and afterwards been reanimated. Nor can I point to anybody who has. Truly, I’ve read of such phenomena, though I must confess I cannot cite you to either book or page.” He paused as his batwings swung inward again.

His latest visitor stopped and glanced around in puzzled inquiry. He carried two fever thermometers in his coat and smelled like tincture of iodine. There was hesitancy in his manner as he advanced and placed what appeared to be his medicine satchel upon Bogie’s bar. He was straight, slender, about as tall as Lee Winters, though in Bogie’s private opinion somewhat better looking.

“Gentlemen,” he said quietly, “I trust I’m not intruding.”

“Not at all,” said Bogie. “Glad to have you.”

“Thank you, sir. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Dr. Dane Piggot from Philadelphia, bound for Pangborn Gulch, with this annoying temporary stopover in Forlorn Gap.”

“Doctor, did you say?” asked two gold-diggers at once.

“That is correct, gentlemen.”

Winters eyed him suspiciously.

“That’s right odd,” he said. “Nobody ever gets sick in Pangborn Gulch; they’re too busy robbing

and killing one another.”

Piggot lifted disapproving eyebrows at Winters. “Sir, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Ah, my apology,” Bogie interposed quickly. “Dr. Piggot, this is my friend Deputy Marshal Lee Winters.”

WINTERS and Piggot did not shake hands, though Piggot had shaken with Moss Tyner and several others.

“Indeed,” he said coolly. He turned and observed Bogie appraisingly. “I trust you have no sick people in your city?” Without awaiting answer, he returned his attention to Winters. “That question is too optimistic, however. This gentleman—this pseudo-officer, I should say—is far from healthy. What in particular seems to ail you, Deputy Winters?”

Lee turned his back to Bogie’s bar and hoisted his elbows. “Dr. Pig, what ails me is something common to men of my tribe; I’m in process of drying up and blowing away.”

Piggot’s manner was strangely cold and menacing. Timidity, which characterized him at first, had given way to bold and sinister scrutiny. “It is my opinion, sir, that you should beware of all stiff breezes henceforth. Certainly you look sufficiently dried up already to be departing this life most any day.”

Moss Tyner, head and shoulders above all except Bogannon, shook his big head at Piggot. “You don’t know Winters like we do, Doc; he’s lean, but he’s tough. Sliced up fine enough, he’d make first-rate shoestrings.”

Winters, feeling that he was coming off second-best all around, turned to Bogannon. “Any mail for me, Doc?”

Bogie started. “My sincere apology, Winters.” He reached back and handed two envelopes to Lee, both addressed in Marshal Hugo Landers’ impossible handwriting. “Came on midnight stage from Brazerville.”

Winters took them and went out.

Piggot’s behavior softened immediately, though not his disregard for Winters. “I’ve seen many and varied law officers here and there, but never one so sorry looking as he who just left. I don’t wonder that lawlessness is so prevalent in these remote regions of our country.”

Bogie leaned over his bar to receive whispered words from one of his customers. “Ah,” he said,

looking at Piggot. “Doctor, these men would like to ask you something.”

“Why, certainly,” said Piggot.

“You ask him, Bogannon,” they responded.

“Well, sir, something most unusual has occurred in Forlorn Gap within these past few hours, Dr. Piggot.” He glanced at his listeners. “What was that dead man’s name?”

“Widowalk,” several answered. “Allday Widowalk.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Bogie. “Well, Doctor, this apparently dead body was found lying on one of our plank sidewalks this morning. However, no doubt in anticipation of coming events, he had prepared his last request, so to speak. These were his written words: ‘To whom it may concern. My name is Allday Widowalk. Please do not bury me. I am not dead.’ Most unusual, eh? These men asked me if I’d ever seen stiff bodies that were not dead.” Bogie paused, stared wide-eyed at Piggot. “My stars, man, what’s wrong? You look ghostly.”

PIGGOT was nervously opening his medicine satchel. He pointed. “Hand me that glass of water quickly.” When Bogie handed it to him he pinched white powder into it, sloshed it about and gulped it down. “Thank heavens!” he exclaimed. “This is something I learned just in time.”

Men stared, open-mouthed.

Bogie, also, stared. “What does this mean, Doctor?”

Piggot looked from face to face, ghastliness in his expression. “Plague!” he gasped.

Gold-diggers gasped, in turn. “Plague!” they exclaimed, horrified.

Bogie was silent, uncertain whether to be scared stiff or to run for his life.

Moss Tyner was first to act rationally. “Doc Piggot, what was that medicine you just took?”

Piggot glanced at his satchel then seized it and held it close to his body. “No!” he said. “That’s my plague medicine; I’ve none to spare.”

Gold-diggers gaped at one another.

“Not even one dose?” Tyner asked.

Piggot shook his head. “Even if I had plenty, you couldn’t afford to buy it. It’s far more precious than gold.”

“Couldn’t you get some more?”

Piggot reflected. His countenance brightened. “Ah, possibly I could. Yes, in two or three days—”

“Then you’ll sell us some of what you’ve got?”

Piggot halted between two opinions. "For selfish reasons, my good sense tells me not to part with what I have. Yet when I think of how many of you may be lying dead within less than ten days, considerations of humanity tell me not to be selfish. Yes—. No—. No, I've got to think of myself first. But, still—. No, I'm sorry, gentlemen. One dose would cost you twenty dollars. That's too much. Yet if I sold it for less, I'd be pauperized at once."

"I'll give you twenty dollars," said Tyner, "if it'll keep me from having plague."

"Of course, of course," said Piggot. "It would do that, certainly. Yet I don't know what I should do."

Miners murmured, looked woebegone.

Moss Tyner pleaded, "You've got to save us, Doc Piggot; we've done been exposed."

Piggot turned to Bogie. "Glasses of water, sir. My physician's oath will not let me withhold what will save these lives."

Double-eagles began to shine.

WINTERS had gone to his office and opened his letters. One contained reward posters. Its companion brought Marshal Landers' order that he go at once to Pedigo Ranch, where two killers named Giles Gobart and Baldy Letcher were believed to be holed up. This letter closed with one morsel of encouragement: *Deputy Tipton will ride down from Pangborn Gulch to side you. Meet him at Bullskin Holler. Yours truly, Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

Lee scabbarded his best rifle and fastened it to his saddle. Desperate killers might bring on some long-range warfare; he was not one to ride helter-skelter into danger if he could help it.

As Pedigo Ranch was several hours' distance, he stopped by his house and had Myra wrap up some lunch.

While she was at it, he said offhandedly, "Did you ever hear of anybody being dead that didn't want to be buried?"

She eyed him reprovingly. "Lee, what silly questions you can ask."

Winters let his gaze rest upon her affectionately. Sometimes premonition warned him not to leave her alone, even for one hour. Such premonition was not so strong now, yet his mind was troubled.

"While I'm gone to Pedigo, you'll be careful, won't you?"

"I'm always careful."

He told her about Allday Widowalk. "Widdy looks dead enough," he added, "but even so, I've got my doubts."

Myra showed concern, but she laughed it off. "Why, Lee, you know it's just somebody's joke. That letter was slipped into his pocket as somebody's idea of what's funny. Don't you think?"

"What do you think?"

He left her thinking and went out to his horse.

Cannon Ball was cantering past Alpha Omega's store when Winters saw Omega himself standing out front. His arms waved for Winters to stop.

"What's wrong, Alph?"

Omega threw back his lanky shoulders. His manner was defiant. "I'm going to bury him, Winters."

Lee's defiance was more restrained. "He don't belong to me, Alph."

"He don't belong to me either, but I'm going to put him under."

Winters kneed his horse. "All right, Alph, but if he turns over in his grave, you'll be arrested for murder."

Omega shook his fist at Winters and yelled after him, "You're just trying to scare me out of some profitable business, Winters. But I'll show you. I'm going to bury him."

AS WINTERS turned north into Pangborn Road he glanced toward Bogannon's saloon. Simultaneously several gold-diggers rushed out.

Moss Tyner saw Winters and yelled, "Hold it, Winters." He came running.

Winters stopped. "Somebody else died, Moss?"

Tyner pulled up, panting. "Winters, it's plague. That corpse ain't dead; plague does 'em that way. Sometimes they come alive again, sometimes they don't. Ain't no way of telling which it'll be. You'd better get you some medicine, Winters."

"Medicine?"

"Yes, sir, Winters. This Doc Piggot says his medicine will head off plague, if you take it in time. Mighty expensive stuff, but it's worth every dollar it costs."

Winters thought hurriedly. "Did this Piggot say Widowalk ain't dead?"

"That's about what he said, Winters. He says plague's got him. Widowalk may be dead for keeps; again, he may come alive—who knows? As of right now, nobody can say whether he's dead or

not.”

Winters was uncertain whether to be scared or angry. “Anyhow, Moss, you better stop by and talk to Alph Omega. Alph says he aims to bury that dead corpse, whether or no.” He kned Cannon Ball again. “Let’s go, horse.”

Tyner called excitedly. “Winters, ain’t you going to buy some plague medicine?”

“When I come back, maybe,” Winters replied.

He allowed Cannon Ball to stretch into his customary long, easy lope and continue it until he reached Pedigo Road. There he slacked and began to climb. Several miles of high, dangerous trail followed.

At Panther Cove’s drip spring, Lee ate his lunch.

Shortly before mid-afternoon he pulled up where Pedigo Road crossed Bullskin Creek. Young, somber, soft-spoken Deputy Tipton rode out of hiding on his sturdy piebald roan. “I’d about give you up, Winters.”

“Got delayed, Roy,” said Winters. He thought of telling about Allday Widowalk, but decided not to waste time. “Any news from Pedigo Ranch?”

“I can’t figure it,” said Tipton. “Yesterday evening late, I stopped at Pedigo. Visited right freely with Jop Pedigo. No strangers been there for weeks, Joplin says.”

“Did he say it like he was scared?”

“Not one bit scared.”

They swung down and compared letters and reward posters.

Their picture of Baldy Letcher in particular interested Winters. “I’ve seen this little baldheaded, thin-faced monkey somewhere. Anything familiar about him to you?”

Tipton shook his head. “New to me, Winters. I don’t like his looks though. He’s snaky. He’d hit you when you ain’t looking.” Tipton mused briefly, then lifted sad eyes to Winters. “Did Hugo say if he wants ‘em dead or alive?”

Winters shook his head. “But it don’t make Hugo no difference. He just wants ‘em out of circulation.”

“Well, let’s go look.”

Winters had turned to another picture. “Roy, how about this one of Niles Gobart?”

Tipton frowned over it. “Something familiar about that fox-face. Ain’t that some record, though? There ain’t nothing he ain’t done.”

“Mostly wanted for swindle,” mused Winters;

“murder seems like something just thrown in.” He continued to puzzle over Gobart’s picture. Definitely, though vaguely, he was reminded of Dr. Dane Piggot. Even if no two monkeys were alike, it wasn’t always easy to tell one from another, especially by looking at one in person and at another on paper. “I’ve seen him somewhere,” he concluded and put his posters away.

AT DARK, he and Tipton were again at Bullskin Creek.

“Just as I figured,” said Tipton. “Long ride for nothing. But good to see you again, Winters. Take care of yourself.”

“I hope to do that,” said Winters. “Good-night, Roy.”

Winters was thankful for moon light. Cannon Ball was skittish of his own shadow, otherwise his shenanigans were few and inconsequential.

Time for thought stretched between didoes, and Winters suffered chills from what he was thinking. Those wanted monkeys supposed to have been holed up at Pedigo couldn’t possibly have been there. Why? Because they were in Forlorn Gap. Not exactly holed up either.

Remembering what Hugo had written about them, Winters shivered and tried to pull his head down into his vest. He had much to puzzle over, yet there was one person in Forlorn Gap who’d know some things he wanted to know. That person was his wife, Myra Winters.

She reached out and pulled him in by main strength when he tramped up to her door. “Lee, don’t ever stay out there one second longer than you have to.”

Her agitation angered him, not at her, but at whatever had caused her to behave so strangely. “Well,” he exclaimed, “this can bear explaining.”

“You’ll have to sit down first,” she told him.

He sat down, firelight casting shadows as she sat down and faced him.

“Now, tell it,” he said.

“Lee, it’s happened, just as in books.”

“Uh-huh. I figured your books would answer some questions. Go ahead.”

“Lee, everybody has gone crazy. Women have been running here all day, telling me plague has hit town and I’d better get some plague medicine or I’ll become like Allday Widowalk—dead, and not dead.”

“Did you get some medicine?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Don’t tell me you want to be like that dead corpse?”

“Lee, something’s wrong,” said Myra indignantly. “In old times, there were plagues, and people died by millions; but I’ve never read anything about corpses being alive. They were either dead or not dead; nobody had to guess. Another thing. When plagues broke out, swindlers appeared with their cures, luck pieces and plague medicines. What they had to sell, helped anybody. And do you know what I think?”

“I’m sure it’s plenty sensible,” said Winters.

“I think Piggot wrote that letter you found on Widowalk’s body; maybe he even killed Widowalk. Anyhow, Piggot is no good.”

“Is he still in town?”

“I suppose so. Anyhow, he didn’t have enough medicine to go round. Early this morning he announced he’d sent to Brazerville for more. It’s expected in at midnight. Meanwhile, men and women are waiting at Doc Bogannon’s saloon, most of them scared half to death.”

Winters got up. “Maybe I’d better go see.”

Myra’s wifely concern asserted itself suddenly. “Your supper, Lee.”

“It can wait.”

She let him out reluctantly. “Lee, you’ll be careful?”

“Of course; you just keep yourself locked in till I get back.”

WINTERS rode past Omega’s store. He swung off and tried to enter, but found its door locked.

At Bogie’s, men and women waiting outside stared at him. These were people he knew, hard-working gold-diggers, their plainly dressed wives, several small children.

Winters swung down and hitched. “What’s going on here?”

Most of them were too scared to answer. One Ezra Lofield said dully, “we’re waiting for Brazerville stage.”

“What for?”

“It’s supposed to bring plague medicine,” said Ezra.

“What makes you think that?”

“Dr. Piggot sent for it.”

“What’s he charging you?”

“Twenty dollars for one dose.”

“Where’s he at?”

“He’s at Goodlett’s.”

“Where’s that dead body?”

“It’s still at Omega’s.”

Winters tramped inside and found gold-diggers and strangers waiting at tables.

Bogie, pouring drinks behind his bar, glanced up nervously as his batwings swung in. “Winters!” As Winters strode up, he added nervously, “Winters, am I glad to see you!”

Winters planked down his money. “Wine, Doc.”

“Wine it is, Winters.” Bogie poured, then murmured softly, “Winters, I’ve got something here.”

Winters downed his drink and backhanded his mustache. His eyebrows went up. “You’ve got me curious, Doc.”

Bogie delivered glasses of whiskey but hurried back. “Don’t let anybody see you, Winters, but I’ve got some plague medicine here.”

“So you’re in business, too?” said Winters dryly.

“It’s nothing to be facetious about, Winters.” Bogie brought up his plague medicine, done up in paper. “I bought this from Dr. Piggot; cost me twenty dollars for one small pinch.”

“Why haven’t you swallowed it?” asked Winters.

“Taste it, Winters.”

Lee touched his tongue with his right forefinger, then his wet finger to Bogie’s plague medicine. After licking briefly at his finger, he looked at Bogie. “Doc, it’s soda.”

Bogie nodded. “Plain baking soda.”

Winters turned and cast his eyes over Bogie’s guests. Scared men stared back at him. Winters found what he sought. “Alph Omega, you’re wanted.”

Omega, tall, loose-jointed and more gloomy than ever, got up slowly. He said dazedly, “You mean me?”

“I mean you,” said Winters.

“But I didn’t bury him, Winters.”

Omega looked determined. “You’re wrong there, Winters. I wouldn’t touch that corpse if he’s never buried; he’s got plague.”

“Ain’t you had your plague medicine yet?”

“No. That’s what I’m waiting for. That’s what we’re all waiting for.”

“Are you sure that corpse is still at your place?”

“He’s there, Winters,” somebody answered for Omega. “Two of us window-peeped at him ten

minutes ago. He's stretched out, dead and stiff."

Approaching sounds caused everybody to still, then to rise as one man. "It's coming!" they shouted. "Brazerville stage is coming."

Within seconds Bogannon and Winters were alone.

"Winters," said Bogie, "if you tell those people Piggot's medicine is worthless, they'll hang you. They're scared out of their wits."

"That's plain to be seen, Doc." Winters shifted his gunbelt. "But they're going to be told. Want to listen?"

"I might as well," replied Bogie. "It's midnight, anyhow; give me time to close up."

WINTERS didn't wait for Bogannon. Horses and stagecoach were sweeping into town. Under Goodlett's front light, Dr. Piggot waited, while those below stared eastward.

Winters got there in time to see Piggot catch something tossed to him by stage driver Quirt Tenzel.

As people pressed forward, Piggot motioned them back. "No rush necessary; there's enough here for everybody."

Winters shoved through to Goodlett's porch.

Tenzel had swung down to unload baggage of incoming passengers. He recognized Winters. "What's wrong here, Winters? Everybody gone loco?"

"Haven't you heard?" replied Winters. "Plague has hit this town."

Tenzel gulped. "Plague!"

"Right," said Winters. "If you've got business elsewhere, now's your best time to tend to it."

Tenzel lost no time in stirring up dust.

Piggot gestured sharply at eager candidates for medicine. "You people line up. I'll provide for you inside."

Winters had stepped up beside Piggot. "No you won't, Piggot; you're wanted for fraud and murder, from here clean to Missouri."

Piggot stared murderously at his disturber. "Officer, aside from being this country's outstanding fool, you're interfering between life and death." He tossed his thumb at gawking onlookers. "These people are going to die, unless they get their medicine. Their time is short. Men, if you allow this upstart to have his way, you'll all be like that man Widowalk at Omega's morgue. You'll be stretched out like dead people, and some

of you will be buried alive."

"No!" people clamored. "Let him alone, Winters."

"I'll let him alone when he's in jail," Winters shouted angrily. "He's been selling people common baking soda at twenty dollars per pinch. Don't let that corpse at Omega's fool you. He's either dog dead, or he's in cahoots with this swindler." He whipped out his six-gun and jammed it against Piggot's back. "Move. We're going to see that corpse right now."

Piggot screamed his protest. "You people are all fools if you let him do this to me. You'll all die; it will serve you right, too."

Doc Bogannon had showed up. "It won't take long to settle this question about Widowalk. We're all for Dr. Piggot, of course, but Winters has never been wrong yet."

"That's right," several agreed. "This town owes plenty to Winters."

They made way for Winters and reluctant Piggot.

"You people can come along, if you want to," said Winters. He caught Alpha Omega's eye. "Come on, Alph. You're going to let us in."

Omega tagged along, but grumbled, "If you'd kept your nose out of my business, Winters, I'd have had him buried by now."

AT OMEGA'S everybody held back except Winters, Piggot, Bogannon, and Omega. They went in and by lamplight continued back to Alph's morgue room. There Bogie and Omega stopped and became nervous, scared spectators.

Winters shoved Piggot forward. "Now, Niles Gobart, alias Piggot, your professional learning and experience should answer what we want to know. Is he dead, or ain't he?"

"I refuse to touch him," Piggot declared furiously. "This room is full of contagion already; to touch that body is to invite death. I refuse."

Winters motioned to Omega. "Fetch your lamp closer."

"No, Winters," responded Omega. "I'll have nothing more to do with that corpse; I'm too close already."

Bogannon took Omega's lamp. "Allow me." He moved up and stood close to Winters.

"Back off," said Winters mysteriously. "I've seen what I wanted to see." Winters stepped close to Widowalk, so that he was not in line with Piggot

and Bogie. He had holstered his six-gun, but his gunhand was close and tense. "Now, Doc, watch what happens." Lee's left hand grasped Widowalk's superlative hair and jerked.

It came off in his hand, and Widowalk leaped up; and faster than Bogie could see guns blazed and smoked, and his ears were momentarily deafened. When it was over, he was holding onto his lamp

with both hands. He stared dumbly at Winters, who was quietly putting away his gun. Piggot and Widowalk, alias Gobart and Baldy Letcher, were lying dead, each holding his derringer, their muzzles smoking.

Winters blinked, sleeved his forehead and lifted his eyebrows at Omega. "All right, Alpha, you can bury him now."