

Suddenly, all the menfolk around Forlorn Gap were drifting away to dig shadowy gold, while womenfolk were mysteriously being killed . . .



They were all digging up worthless rocks, and carrying on as if they'd discovered pure gold.

THE STRANGE PIPER

by Lon WILLIAMS

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters lingered with his wife longer than usual, debated with himself whether to leave her at all. She had come out of their cottage to say goodbye at their customary parting place, between back door and corral; but instead of her habitual cheerfulness she showed worry and uneasiness, paid more attention to his great horse Cannon Ball than to Winters himself.

"Lee," she said wistfully, "he could bring you home in a hurry, couldn't he? That is, if he needed to."

"He's a good horse," Winters replied, puzzled.

"Of course I'm not scared," Myra continued. "It's just that—well, you know how you feel after bad dreams. Not that I've had especially disturbing dreams of late, but last night . . ."

"What about last night?"

She looked at him queerly. "Last night I heard music."

“Music? What kind?”

“I don’t know. It was different, somehow, from anything I’d heard before. It wasn’t a flute or fife, but something like both. Didn’t you hear it?”

“No, Myra.”

She smiled then, assumed a cheerfulness patently forced. “I guess it was only something I dreamed. Don’t worry about it; I’ll be all right.”

He kissed her cheek and mounted his horse. “You’ll be careful, won’t you? Keep your gun handy?”

“Yes, Lee. And if it’s night when you get home, I’ll make sure it’s you before I unlock any doors.”

He rode off, as disturbed as she. But they were not alone in being uneasy; this whole semi-ghost town of Forlorn Gap was uneasy.

At Pepper Neal’s store several gold-diggers had congregated.

“Winters, it’s a good thing you’ve come along,” declared big Moss Tyner, who had a claim in Fudge Around Gulch. “There’s been another murder.”

Winters quieted Cannon Ball “Another woman?”

“Another woman,” replied Tyner. “Jim Weitzell’s young wife this time. Jim was late getting back from Elkhorn Pass; found her strangled. You’ve got to do something, Winters.”

“Yeah,” drawled Winters. “You point out this murderer and I’ll shoot him for you. It’s that simple.”

“We don’t know who he is.”

“Any strangers in town?”

“Always strangers drifting through.”

While they talked, one came along—a handsome, tall dude in high hat, black trousers, long-tailed coat, and white shirt with ruffled sleeves. He was clean-shaved and looked to be about forty.

“Morning, gentlemen,” he said gaily.

Winters eyed him sharply, stirred by his natural suspicion of dudes. “Morning, stranger.”

“Stranger? Ah, I suppose I am a stranger here to most of you. My name is Fothergill—Dennison Fothergill. My business, mining investments. Presently I’m putting up at Goodlett Hotel.”

Winters said without friendliness, “I’m Lee Winters, deputy marshal hereabouts. I judge you’re not traveling far, seeing as you’re afoot.”

“Merely out for my morning constitutional. Good-day to you, Officer.”

He strode on, straight and elegant, a cane swinging right and left in graceful arcs.

“Wouldn’t be him,” said a gold-digger.

WINTERS was still suspicious. There’d been queer flickers in Fothergill’s eyes, a peculiar outward slant to his big teeth. He looked at Moss Tyner. “Anybody else been taking morning constitutionals?”

Tyner shook his head. “None that I’ve seen.”

A small gold-digger with eye wrinkles and beard blinked at Winters. “I seed one yesterday about sundown. He was a humped sort of bozo, dressed in shabby britches, ragged shirt that showed his hairy chest, an old round hat with black hair stringing down past his ears. Looked more ape than human.”

“Going toward or away from Goodlett’s?” asked Winters.

“Away from. But not toward Jim Weitzell’s. More like he might’ve been leaving town.”

Winters rode on and dropped in at Doc Bogannon’s saloon.

“Winters!” Bogie exclaimed. “Come in and welcome.”

Bogannon was himself a man of mystery. He was big, dark, handsome, with head and face that evidenced great intellect, a man obviously meant for better things than owning and operating Forlorn Gap’s only saloon. Yet apparently he was content with his trade and with living with an amorous half-breed Shoshone for wife.

Winters put down his usual coin. “Wine, Doc.”

As he poured, Bogie cast an inquiring glance. “You look worried, Winters. Something wrong?”

Winters downed his drink and looked at his glass. “Another woman’s been murdered, Doc.”

It was Bogie’s turn to be disturbed. “That’s bad, Winters. Could’ve been my beautiful Shoshone.”

“Or my beautiful Myra,” said Lee. “Seen any off-trail characters lately?”

Bogie scratched an area on his high forehead which he called his thinking spot. “Winters, I seldom see any *except* off-trail characters. But something’s been bothering me these past few days. I hesitate to mention it, but there’s an ominous feeling in Forlorn Gap. Got it myself. Of course I don’t believe in ghosts, but—”

“But what?”

“You’ll likely scoff, Winters,” Doc said worriedly, “but last night I heard music.”



Many were the strange things Winters had seen in Alkali Flats . . .

Winters caught his breath. "No!"

"Just as I anticipated, you do scoff."

"But I don't, Doc. My wife heard it, too."

"No! A kind of piping, was it?"

"Exactly. But otherwise not like anything she'd ever heard before."

"Then I *did* hear it. I'd hoped I only dreamed it." Bogie poured himself a small drink, swallowed it and put down his glass. "Winters, I don't go for ghosts, being as I am a practical man, but I don't mind telling you I'm worried."

Winters started to leave but turned back. "Doc, do you know a dude named Dennison Fothergill?"

Bogie scratched his thinking spot again. "A tall, handsome gent with queer eyes and right prominent teeth?"

"That's him."

"Ummm," mused Bogie. "Men usually interest me, without otherwise affecting me. But this Fothergill . . . Winters, he gives me creeps, as if he might be some sort of beast."

"Me, too," said Lee. "I figure he ain't exactly what he seems."

"Indeed?" said Bogie. "But I get you. He could be one of those dual personality fellows, a *genus*

schizophrenia, perhaps."

Winters was slightly peeved. "Yeah. Only I didn't want to get over your head by putting it so bookishly."

HE STRODE out, determined to have a talk with Dennison Fothergill. When his ride about town had proved fruitless, he called at Goodlett Hotel and was shown to Fothergill's room. That room, presently untenanted, was like any other hotel room occupied by a respectable man of means. It was clean, orderly and otherwise above suspicion.

He rode to Gallitena Gulch in search of a wanted monkey, reported to have holed up there as a gold-digger. Time fled, and night found him homeward bound by intermittent cloud and moonlight.

What he had not told Myra and Doc Bogannon was that he, too, had heard strange piping; that he, too, had an ominous feeling, as if death stalked his travels.

Cannon Ball was cantering along a cliff-lined trail when suddenly he shrank back into a half-rearing stop, his body a-quiver with fright.

Once more, Winters heard music, its source some instrument whose identity he did not recognize. Bogannon had described what he'd heard as a kind of piping; that described this music. But its enchanting sweetness was beyond description, inviting complete forgetfulness and surrender to its charm. Winters looked as he listened, but no musician met his eye.

Abruptly that ethereal music stopped at its source, though its echoes winged over chasms and cliffs so long as to enliven strings of perpetual memory. Search as he might, Winters saw only a solitary four-legged animal perched high on a great rock, its outline against background of cloud and stars identifying it at last as a goat of exceptionally large and graceful proportions.

A voice came to him then. "Winters, did you like my music?"

"Huh!" exclaimed Winters. He had a frightening sensation of having been addressed by a goat. "Yeah," he said, gulping. "Sure, I liked it. Prettiest music I ever heard. But who are you? And where are you?"

"You are looking at me," that unnerving voice replied. "My name is Pan. By some I am called Paunus Major, or Paunus. It is observed by me that you often ride alone at night. Fortunately, for you, I am your friend."

Winters wiped sweat from his face. His wife had read something to him about a Greek god called Pan. Myths, those stories were called. There were many of them—unbelievable, fascinating yarns born, he had supposed, from ignorance and superstitious fears. He had felt no cause for considering himself insane or asleep, but now he perspired from doubt. Unnerving terror, too, for certainly that goat had looked down at him and talked.

Nor was it all goat. Though it had horns and upright, pointed ears, a bright wash of moonlight disclosed a youthful—even beautiful—human face.

Winters swallowed desperately. "Glad to know you're my friend. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

He kned his horse into motion. Cannon Ball's walk quickly evolved into a lope, with Winters casting fearful backward looks. Pan, or Paunus Major, had disappeared after a moment behind intervening cliffs; and Winters, rubbing his forehead, told himself he'd merely had a brief scare, coupled with what Doc Bogannon would have described as a highly fanciful illusion.

BUT AFTER supper, when he and Myra sat by their evening fire, he said as casually as he could manage, "Myra, I've been trying to recall that story you once read to me about a Greek god or something called Paunus, or Pan. Remember?"

"Of course, Lee." Myra studied him curiously. "Why were you thinking of him?"

Winters kept his eyes upon changing embers. "I've often wondered myself what it is that sets a man to thinking. But what about this Pan?"

Myra reflected briefly. "Pan? Oh, yes, I remember. But let me get one of those wonderful books you bought for me." She went to a shelf, presently returned with an old volume of myths and legends. She found what she sought in it and read. Pan, according to her book, was one of those numerous deities believed in by ancient Greeks. This one was an Arcadian—one who had arms, legs, ears, and horns of a goat. Like every mythical deity, he had his own special interests, namely, flocks, herds and crowds of people. From his name was derived a famous word, *panic*. When herds or people stampeded, it was because Pan had terrorized them.

And Pan was a piper; his music was enchanting. He could cause people to have visions and dreams. His haunts were those of wild-country shepherds. *Woe unto any who offended him! Blessed were they whom he regarded with affection!*

When she had read at length, Myra suddenly closed her book. "That music!" she whispered. "Lee!"

He glanced up without telltale expression. "Yeah?"

"That music I heard last night—do you suppose—"

"I don't suppose anything," he cut in brusquely. "That's what's wrong with such books, they fill people's heads with scares and imagined things."

Myra sat in deep study. "Visions. Dreams. Pipes." She sighed. "But having dreams is nothing new. I suppose those murders have got us all frightened. Yet certainly there's nothing in this story about Pan being a murderer."

Winters remembered Dennison Fothergill, his queer eyes and those outward-slanting teeth. "Is there anything in that book about Pan changing himself into human form?"

"Oh, no," said Myra. "It's not even so much as hinted at. Besides, I don't believe these myths. I don't believe any Paunus or Pan ever existed.

We're just scared. Everybody's scared."

Next morning, Forlorn Gap had additional cause for being afraid. Five women came knocking at Winters' door; Lee and Myra rushed out to learn what was wrong.

Those women, some of them young and pretty, were scared and bewildered.

Winters hid his alarm by show of impatience. "Now what's up?" he demanded.

"Our men," replied a middle-aged woman, Mack Argyle's wife. "Our men are gone."

"Gone where, Esmerelda?" Myra asked sympathetically.

All five visitors started to talk at once.

"One at a time," snapped Lee.

"Esmerelda, you tell us," said Myra.

ESMERELDA drew a deep breath. "Well, it's just hard to believe. But sometime after midnight, my husband sat up in bed right suddenly. Then before you could say Jack Robinson he was out and putting on his clothes. He told me to get up and fix him a sack of grub. He'd had a vision. There was gold. He'd had a vision of gold, and he was going to get it."

"Where was this gold?" Winters inquired sharply.

"Some place never heard of before," Esmerelda answered. "Arcadia Gulch, Mack said. Though he'd never before heard of such place, he saw it in his vision and knowed right where to find it. North of Elkhorn Road, he said. You'd take a right-hand trail this side of Gallitena Gulch, and you'd come to a little creek where there'd be great pine trees. That was Arcadia Gulch, and once you'd staked a claim there, you'd never want for gold anymore."

Myra looked aghast at Winters. "Arcadia," she whispered in awe. "Lee, I'm scared."

Winters himself had what he called dry swallows. *Pan! Deity from Arcadia!* He looked at Esmerelda's companions. "Is that why your husbands left?"

They nodded.

A young one said fearfully, "My Harold had that same vision. I just couldn't stop him."

Winters squeezed his forehead, tried to shake his mind free. "All right," he said gruffly. "Go on home; I'll see what can be done."

They thanked him and reluctantly departed.

Winters and Myra waited outside their cottage until they were alone.

Myra shuddered. "Lee, I'm scared."

"They are, too," Winters said dryly. "But it's no time for panic."

Myra gasped. "Panic! That's it, Lee."

He urged her inside and buckled on his six-gun. "I oughtn't to used that word." He examined his gun, saw that it was loaded and that his cartridge belt was full of ammunition. "But it's not like *you* to be scared, Myra. While I'm gone, however, I want you to keep your doors and windows locked. Also, keep your gun within reach every minute. Promise?"

"Y-yes, Lee."

He kissed her goodbye indoors, and rode to Doc Bogannon's saloon. This time Bogie was not alone. He had his wife with him.

"Winters!" he shouted nervously. "Come in, Winters."

Lee took off his hat, strode to a table and dropped into a chair. "Doc, I want to talk to you." He nodded at Bogie's Shoshone. "You, too, Singing Thrush."

She came hesitantly, slender and entrancing in beaded dress, golden headband and red feather. She nodded gracefully to Winters and accepted a chair beside her husband. "What do you wish of Singing Thrush?"

"I want to know something," Winters replied. "Your people have been around these mountains much longer than us palefaces. Ever hear of a man-goat, or goat-man?"

SINGING THRUSH looked startled, but her Shoshone blood asserted itself; she quickly concealed her surprise and glanced at Bogie. "What shall I tell him, my husband?"

Bogie said soberly, "Tell him he's crazy."

"You are crazy, Officer Winters," she said obediently.

"Yeah," said Winters. "Wouldn't be surprised." He glanced at Bogie. "Why did she come here with you, Doc? First time I recollect this ever happened."

"A mere precaution, Winters," Bogie replied. "There's a killer at large, you know. Has an especial taste for women."

Winters, studying his scholarly friend, said coldly, "Look here, Doc, I asked your wife a sensible question. I want to know what she's got to say about it."

Bogie nodded at Singing Thrush. "Tell him, my

love.”

“Yes, Officer Winters,” she said in her sweet, musical voice. “There is a man-goat in our mountains. Very, very few have seen him, but many have heard his music. Even my beloved husband has recently heard his piping.”

Winters swallowed with difficulty. “Yeah, I know.”

“You hadn’t wished to hear that, had you, Winters?” said Bogie, smiling oddly. “You’d hoped this was only my imagination.”

“No,” replied Winters. “I’m glad to hear it. I’d begun to think I’d gone cuckoo.”

“You know, of course, what happened last night?” Bogie asked.

“What happened?”

“Every gold-digger in town left shortly after midnight.”

“Yeah,” said Winters, “I’d heard something about that. They had visions.” He got up and pulled on his hat. “And just think how many women are left defenseless. That murderer can now take his pick of them.”

Bogie glanced at his lovely Shoshone. “This one excepted,” he said. “She’s not leaving my side until that killer’s killed.”

“Nobody knows when that’ll be,” said Winters. “But them crazy gold-diggers are coming back today. I’m going after ‘em.”

He could at least credit himself with good intentions, he thought, as he rode briskly along Elkhorn Road, afterwards northward toward Gallitena.

Gold-rushers had left their tracks. He followed them from where they’d turned off Gallitena Road. After many turns and cutbacks he came upon them at last, about thirty men, young and middle-aged. There was, indeed, a small creek. There were, also, many magnificent pines. Here was more than a gulch; it was a hidden valley, quiet, grand, possessed of dreamlike beauty.

Arcadia!

Men were digging, as if enchanted. When Winters rode into their midst, they merely glanced at him and went on with their feverish work.

“Listen, you men,” Winters shouted indignantly. A few paused. When he had shouted again, this time angrily, they all quit and looked at him.

“Winters, what do you want?” one asked.

“I want every man of you to get back to your families.”

“And leave all this gold?”

“What gold? I don’t see no gold.”

“But it’s here, Winters.”

“You’re all crazy,” declared Winters. “A spell has been put on you. It was a trick to get you out of town, so your women could be murdered. Get your stuff and head back.”

THEY LOOKED at one another as if they’d never heard of murder. Even big Moss Tyner stared at him, puzzled and unbelieving. “Winters, you’re a good officer. We all know that. But right now you ain’t talking sense. There’s gold here, more than you ever dreamed of. We aim to find it. Why don’t you get down and look? It might be you that found it. Think what that’d mean. More gold than you could spend in a thousand years.”

“It wouldn’t mean anything to me, if it cost me my wife,” declared Winters.

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt if you’d look around a bit, seein’ as you’re here anyhow.”

Winters swung down not to look for gold, but if possible to convince these bewildered men that they should go home. How long it took him to realize his efforts were useless, he didn’t know; he’d kept no track of it. But sundown was near when he at last remounted and turned homeward.

“You can’t say I didn’t try,” he told them.

“That’s all right, Winters,” a few called after him. “We ain’t blaming you for anything.”

He blamed himself, however, for staying with them so long. Worse, he’d gone only a short distance when Cannon Ball threw a shoe. That was surprising, for Lee always prided himself on keeping his horse well shod.

“Be-confound!” he muttered, as he swung down.

It took him until almost dark to retrieve and nail on this unlucky shoe again. His fingers had never before been so clumsy, nails so prone to turn in and reach quick, instead of turning outward, as they were supposed to do.

Fortunately there was bright moonlight to ride by. Since Cannon Ball had to throw a shoe, Winters was thankful it had been done before night. There was further reason for gratitude. Cannon Ball was restless; if he got into one of his running spells, well-clinched shoes would save him from going lame and unseating his rider.

This trail out of Arcadia Gulch seemed longer now. Twice he thought he was lost, only to pass

remembered landmarks and feel relieved.

But shortly after he had come again into Gallitena Road and headed south, he had a chill; cold sweat popped out on his face. Cannon Ball had stopped. His reason for doing so was no mystery either. Once more there was music, that weird, enchantingly sweet piping. Once more Winters sought its origin, once more saw a goat outlined against moonlit sky. This time it drew from its lips some object and let it hang suspended from its neck.

“Pan!” gasped Winters.

This odd creature looked down at him, and now Winters had no doubt that this was Pan, also that Pan was speaking to him.

“Winters,” said Paunus, “do you love your beautiful wife?”

Fear shot through Winters. “Of course I do. Why do you ask?”

“Because she is in danger. If you would save her, you must ride as you have never ridden before.”

“Thanks for telling me,” said Winters. He lifted his horse’s reins and lashed his flank with their ends. “Go home, Cannon Ball,” he cried.

No further urging was required. Cannon Ball leaped as a panther. Clatter of hoofs and resounding echoes became continuous and crashing. Around curves and along precipices he swept, with Winters leaning on his neck and shouting into his ears.

THEN, TO his amazement, Winters beheld a sight that taxed belief to its limit. Traveling with him, leaping from cliff to cliff and across gorges, was Pan. No ordinary goat could have kept pace with Cannon Ball on this terrible run.

But Pan was no ordinary goat. He paid no attention to curves and turns, but leaped straight on. At times he even paused to wait for Winters. That he meant to accompany Winters became certain when they reached Elkhorn Road and Winters turned toward Forlorn Gap.

But then Lee’s heart sank. Minutes after he had turned eastward, a stagecoach, also going eastward, loomed ahead. Its four horses were moving at an easy lope, and on a road so narrow that Winters could not possibly have passed them.

Yet his spirits quickly rose again. Pan, rushing ahead of Cannon Ball, leaped alongside those easygoing horses. Instantly they were panicked;

they reared and plunged. Their driver screamed and set himself against their lines. But uselessly. They were running away. Coach passengers screamed as their vehicle rocked and skidded round perilous curves.

Run as they might, however, Cannon Ball closed in behind them. Their driver, scared stiff, stood up and prepared to jump.

“Don’t do it,” Winters shouted.

“What are you doing there; trying to get us killed?”

“Keep going,” shouted Winters. “Hang onto them lines.”

He got proper response, and their roaring cavalcade swept furiously onward.

As they neared Forlorn Gap, Winters glanced about, then looked again. He searched for Pan, but that man-goat had disappeared.

As stagecoach and horses rumbled past his cottage in front, Winters swung to its rear. He leaped down, and through its open back door rushed inside.

Caution asserted itself then. He heard stair-steps squeak. They squeaked in two places, indicating that two people were going up. There were no other sounds. Winters drew his six-gun and moved silently, but swiftly.

Going up were, indeed, two people. Ahead by five steps, and moving backwards, was Myra, eyes staring, in one hand a candle, her right hanging limply, barely holding onto her gun, which she was clearly not aware that she had.

Following her, back to Winters, was a man who must have resembled a monster. Winters remembered a description: *A humped sort of bozo, dressed in shabby britches, ragged shirt that showed his hairy chest, an old round hat with black hair stringing past his ears.*

Myra did not see Winters. She was staring at that hideous thing which followed her slowly, relentlessly, a gun in his hairy hand pointed at her heart. She backed round a stairway turn, still without realizing her husband was near.

But as her pursuer was about to make that same turn, Winters yelled. His six-gun roared and thundered until it was empty. A body crumpled, tumbled downward, and Dennison Fothergill lay dead, motionless eyes staring at Winters. Lee rushed up to Myra, caught her as she was sinking helpless in a faint.

Minutes later she revived. Wine braced and

steadied her.

WHEN WINTERS had dragged Fothergill's body out and dumped it, she came down, lighted a lantern for him and accompanied him while he put up his horse.

They were returning, when Myra screamed and almost fainted again. "Look, Lee! Look there!"

Winters looked down, as she had pointed. Lying at their feet was a set of pipes, altogether no larger than Lee's right hand. "Now, what could that be?"

"They are Panpipes," cried Myra. "Oh, Lee, he has been here. Pan has been here." She bent and picked them up, held them nervously, but tenderly.

Winters was not so astonished as he pretended to be. "Some boy's toy," he scoffed. "Why don't you play 'em?"

Myra hesitated, finally put them fearfully to her lips. As she blew upon them Winters heard again that sweet, enchanting music he had heard several times before.

"Mighty pretty music for a toy," he observed casually.

Myra removed them from her lips and looked at them longingly. "This is no toy, Lee. No toy ever made such heavenly music as that."

They went in and locked their door.

Upon reaching their living room he was surprised to find a candle burning upon their mantel. Surprise encompassed more than candle. Behind it stood a small image made of clay—a creature half-man, half-goat.

"What's this, Myra?"

Myra placed her newly-found Panpipes beside candle and image. "Lee, forgive me for being so foolish. I . . . Well, I'll tell you. Of course we can't allow ourselves to believe in ghosts and deities and such. But even so . . . Well, I thought—just assuming there might be such a being as Pan—if I'd let him know we wanted to be his friend,

perhaps he'd be our friend, too. So I fashioned an image of him and set a candle before it in his honor."

He put an arm about her shoulders to steady her. "Not a bad idea, Myra."

"But it didn't work, Lee. If you hadn't got here when you did, I'd have been killed."

He considered whether to tell her what he knew, but decided against it. "We can never tell about those things," he said. "Now, let's have some supper and call it a day."

After supper they sat before a small fire until drowsiness was upon them. Myra got up then and was about to extinguish her burning tribute to Pan, when Lee stayed her.

"Why did you stop me, Lee?"

"Let it burn," he said. "A candle is only a candle, a mighty small tribute to give in honor of a friend. Pan may have helped us more than we know."

They went up to bed.

When they came down next morning Myra's image of Pan was still in its place, but candle and pipes were gone.

Noises distracted them momentarily. An amazing sight greeted their eyes, too, when they looked out into Elkhorn Road. Forlorn Gap's queer-acting miners were straggling home.

Silently Lee and Myra turned back. Winters was about to uncover their banked fire, when something caught his eye.

"Myra!"

She hurried to his side. "Lee, what is it?"

He pointed downward. "There," he said.

They both stared in awe at their hearth. Tracks of a goat were clearly discernible in its ashes.

