

Lee Winters' Story

# THE BEE'S NEST

By Lon Williams

Dardeen Blackwood had loved bees, always had them around her—but Dardeen Blackwood was dead, murdered years ago. But now Lee Winters and Doc Bogannon both heard the sound of bees, and Winters had seen a woman who looked like Dardeen Blackwood get off the incoming stage . . .

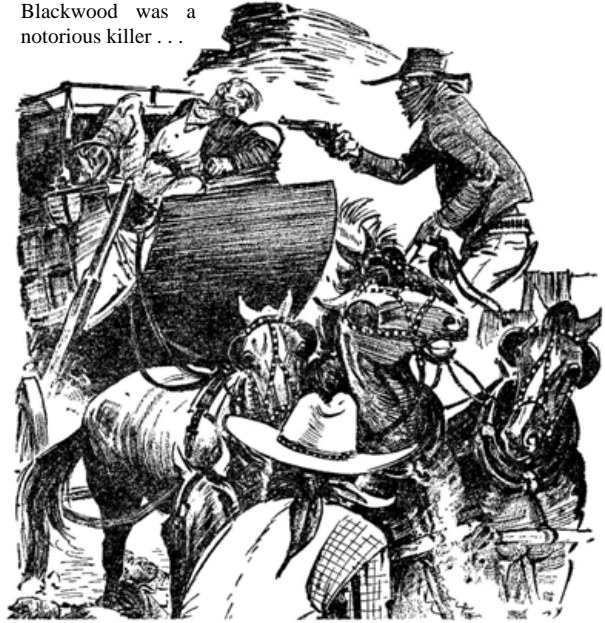
**D**EPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters stopped his horse on Forlorn Gap's northeastern edge and held himself in an attitude of listening. Somewhere in his experience he'd become acquainted with bees, learned to distinguish their easy, gently-musical working flight from that sharply humming noise they made when angry. Though, judged by positions of stars above mountain peaks, it was near midnight, he heard what seemed to him a vast swarm of restless, angry bees. He'd always understood that bees didn't fly after dark; hence, what he heard filled him with uneasiness and foreboding.

He allowed Cannon Ball to drift on past deserted houses, through ghostly, noiseless streets to where a few lights were still burning. At Goodlett Hotel a man stepped from Brazerville-Elkhorn stagecoach. He carried a suitcase and went into Goodlett, ostensibly in search of lodging.

Then, to Lee's dismay, a most attractive young woman also alighted. Something about her appearance caused him to tighten Cannon Ball's reins again. She had no luggage. She did not go into Goodlett Hotel, but walked away alone, wraithlike and noiseless, to be received and hidden by shadows.

Winters sleeved his face. He thought over his past few hours. Nothing had occurred to unnerve him, except possibly his arrest of a wanted monkey named Hemp Dossler, whom he had turned over to Deputy Marshal Jess Fingerwell of Pangborn

Blackwood was a notorious killer . . .



Gulch. He'd had no encounters with spooks, had drunk from no bewitched streams. Yet, if he had not just now seen a ghost his imagination from cause unknown had gone wild. His mind told him a woman who moved without sound, and unseen by anyone except himself, had alighted from Brazerville stage.

Not far from Goodlett Hotel other lights shone.

Doc Bogannon, owner and operator of Forlorn Gap's only remaining saloon, was tidying up for his customary midnight closing when his batwings swung in and a slim, weather-beaten, familiar figure strode in.

"Winters!" Bogie exclaimed hospitably. "Winters, I'm glad to see you."

"Wine and two glasses," responded Winters. He glanced about to find that Bogannon was alone, then dropped a chair by a table and waited.

Bogannon was large, straight, dark-haired, with broad shoulders and magnificent head and face, one of earth's noblemen who, for reasons of his own lived with a half-breed Shoshone wife and operated a saloon as his only visible means of livelihood. Usually he moved fast when serving his friend Winters, but his customary alacrity was now missing.

He brought wine, poured for Winters, then for himself, and sat down. "I trust you've had a good day, Winters?"

Winters sipped his wine. "Right common day," he replied. "But if you'll pardon my saying so, you

look uncommon downhearted yourself.”

Bogie’s heavy eyebrows lifted. “So you noticed? I didn’t realize I was being so obvious. Yes, Winters, I do have a most depressed feeling—aggravated by my inability to account for it in any rational realistic terms.”

“Yeah?” said Winters. His tone suggested further comment.

“It’s true, Winters,” Bogie continued gloomily. “Ordinarily I’m a cheerful individual, one who delights in observation of his fellow man and has few worries about what has gone before, what is now, or what tomorrow may bring. But this evening I’m disturbed by an unreasoning, unreasonable and totally unsupported feeling that I’m through—that for me absolutely nothing is left.”

**L**EE DOWNED his wine and backhanded his mustache. “Doc, for your good right now, you should’ve met my pa’s Aunt Millie Orphington. She was a kind-hearted, patience-lovin’ Ozark Mountain woman.”

Bogie eyed him dully. “Really?”

“Yeah, Doc,” declared Winters with a nod of emphasis. “She had what you’d call a philosophy. Aunt Millie always said, *‘If you ever come to a time when you think you ain’t got nothing at all to look forward to, just remember this: You can always set a mouse trap.’*”

Bogie stared dazedly, then slowly shook his head. “At any other time, Winters, I’d appreciate that. Indeed, I’m confident it’s a profound and meaningful philosophy. But right now, I couldn’t look forward even to catching a mouse.”

“Feel sick?”

“No.”

“Nothing hurts?”

“Nothing.”

“Bad news?”

“Now, that’s close,” said Bogie. “It’s not something I’ve heard either about myself or about other people. It’s simply something I’ve heard.” He stared at Winters as if debating whether he should speak frankly. “I hate to mention it, Winters. You see, I’ve scoffed a great deal about spooks; it’s not pleasant for one to admit his error.”

“Never mind me, Doc. As for ghosts, I can take ‘em or leave ‘em.”

Bogie hardened his nerve. “All right, Winters, I’ve been hearing bees.”

Lee felt himself start. So he hadn’t just imagined things himself. After a moment, he pushed his glass across. “Fill it.” When it was full, he drew it back and drank generously. Then, to hide his own inner stirrings, he said facetiously, “At first you had me worried, Doc, but I get it now. You’ve got ringing in your ears; we all have that experience sooner or later.”

Bogie shook his head. “I thought as much, Winters. But that doesn’t explain it. What I heard was varied, as if an interminable swarm was passing, some of its members winging along at ease, some disturbed, others fiercely singing in anger. No, Winters, it’s not something in my ears. A remarkable phenomenon has been, and is, going on. Sound. Incessant sound. Yet I haven’t seen a bee. Winters, I’m worried.”

Further comment was interrupted. Bogie’s batwings swung inward and a stranger came in—that same stranger Winters had seen alight from Brazerville stage and go into Goodlett Hotel.

“Evening, gentlemen,” their visitor said with an unconvincing effort at politeness. “May I join you?”

Bogie got up and nodded questioningly. “Mind, Winters?”

Winters twisted round in his chair. Something about this stranger immediately hit a string in his memory. Here was a handsome cross between dude and devil, a man with fine features, clean-shaved, tall, his checkered brown suit filled with bone and muscle, gray-green eyes cold, unsmiling, under his left arm a slight bulge which suggested a hideout gun.

“Set down,” said Winters.

“Pleased to have you join us,” said Bogie. “I’m Doc Bogannon. My friend is Deputy Marshal Lee Winters.”

“I’m Sandford Menefee,” announced their visitor. Warily he eased into a chair.

Bogie went for another glass, returned, filled it. “Winters and I were having our customary nightcap. Midnight is my invariable closing time.”

**M**ENEFEE drew a gold watch from his pocket. “Fortunately, several minutes are left.” With his left hand he lifted his glass, eyed Winters fixedly over its top, kept his body at a left-hand angle for a swift draw, quickly downed his drink.

Winters glanced at Bogannon and caught his

breath. Bogie had paled since Menefee's arrival; speech had ceased. In that silence, Winters heard a humming sound, as if bees were all around them. Bogie's pallor suggested that he, too, had heard and was scared.

With a start, Bogie looked at his own watch. "Midnight!" he exclaimed. He got up, gathered his bottle and glasses, and retreated. "Sorry, gentlemen."

Menefee sprang up arrogantly. "Hold it, sir; it lacks ten minutes of midnight."

Winters rose, shoved himself clear of table and chair. Both instinct and experience warned him that a ruthless killer stood before him, a homicidal maniac, indeed, who trembled from his repressed urge to draw and commit instant murder.

"Doc sets his own timepiece, Menefee," Winters told him coldly.

Menefee fixed his murderous scrutiny upon Winters. "Consult your own watch. You know Bogannon is lying."

"My watch is not one to settle arguments by," Winters responded calmly.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning what I said."

"For a moment I thought you might be referring to your forty-five."

"My gun," Winters retorted, "is something I never mention; it speaks for itself."

Menefee hesitated. His coat hung open. Undoubtedly he had contemplated murder of Doc Bogannon, his motive being elimination of something which had opposed his will. Faced with cold opposition from Winters, he changed his mind. Craftiness called for patience. He said with a sneer, "This town is mighty small to be having a deputy marshal."

Bogie had put away bottle and glasses. He stood behind his bar at a point where he kept a gun of his own. "Forlorn Gap is a dangerous place, Menefee. Its people never ask for trouble, yet more badmen have died here than have left on their own feet."

Menefee backed slowly away, a snarl on his lips. "I'm here on business, not for trouble," he said. "Goodnight, gentlemen." He turned, glanced once over his shoulder and strode out.

Winters, alert against treachery, slammed out behind him. But Menefee hurried off toward Goodlett's without further threat.

From nearby, another man moved off into shadow. This one was either on Menefee's trail, or

he was a confederate. Winters felt certain this stranger had not been waiting outside by mere chance.

Bogannon came out, locked his saloon and joined Winters. Lee glanced with satisfaction at a gun which Bogie had shoved under his belt.

"Scared, Doc?" he asked, his mockery designed to conceal his own fear.

Bogie shivered. "Winters, I was never so scared in my life. That Menefee—I don't know whether he was man or ghost."

"He was no ghost," said Lee. "You saw him drink wine. In walking, he made as much noise as anybody."

"But those bees!" Bogie gasped.

"Bees?"

"Winters, don't tell me you didn't hear bees. While Menefee was present, that saloon was full of them."

Winters swallowed dryly. He was glad it was night, so Bogie couldn't see how scared he was. "Let's go home, Doc. You need a good night's rest. Maybe you've been working too hard."

**W**INTERS led his horse and walked home with Bogannon.

When he had there mounted, Bogie looked up gratefully. "Winters, I do appreciate this. As certainly as I'm standing here, you saved my life back there in my saloon. I'd never thought of myself as a coward, but tonight I've been completely terrorized."

"Still hear bees?" asked Winters. As for himself, what faint humming he continued to hear was readily attributable to imagination.

Bogie listened. "Yes, Winters, I do hear them. But, I'm glad to say that humming is no longer so pronounced. There's a danger zone somewhere, and we're still close to it, though not now so close to its center."

A suspicion had grown steadily in Lee's mind, with it a chilly dread. "Doc, have you ever seen Menefee before tonight?"

Bogie replied promptly, "I'm afraid I have, Winters."

"Who is he?"

"I couldn't say of a certainty, but if he's not Dirk Blackwood he's a mighty close likeness."

"Blackwood," mused Winters. "That rings a bell."

"You've probably seen him. He lived for a short

time in one of those now-deserted houses on that side of Elkhorn Road toward Alkali Flat. It's still called Blackwood House; people whom I know are afraid to go near it."

"Why's that?"

Bogie turned his face away, embarrassed. "Winters, this time yesterday I would have answered your question with a smile; now, however, I'm not smiling. Blackwood House is believed to be haunted."

Lee glanced toward one of Bogie's windows. A light glowed inside. Bogie's charming young Shoshone was there. A midnight meal had been set. "Your wife's waiting, Doc. Goodnight."

He kned Cannon Ball and was gone.

Instead of going directly home, he headed south toward Alkali Flat. Early in Forlorn Gap's brief history he had ridden occasionally through Kalany Street past Blackwood House. It was not, as its name hinted, a pretentious place but only a small cottage, noted mainly for its heavy, ornate window shutters and its strong, iron-laced doors.

He had forgotten its exact location, hence came upon it suddenly and without forewarning of what he might see. So abrupt and fierce was his reaction that Cannon Ball was almost on his haunches when he stopped.

Blackwood House was aglow with lamplight, brilliant beyond ordinary illumination. Indeed, Blackwood House seemed to be enveloped within a great dome of light. What surprised him most, though a turn half-expected, was that a slender, enchanting young woman stood framed inside one of its front windows.

She glanced up sweetly and smiled. "Howdy, Lee."

Winters' tongue was almost too dry for speech. "Huh?" he croaked. "I mean, howdy."

"You behave most strangely. Are you scared?"

He gulped. "Yeah, I reckon I am." Then he remembered something. "You got off of Brazerville stage, didn't you?"

She had placed a windowsill dish before her. "Why yes, I did," she replied. "I saw you gawking at me and wondered if you'd lost your manners, as you didn't offer to speak. You should've remembered me. Often I used to see you riding your handsome horse down Forlorn Gap's main street. Why, sometimes you even rode by here. I'm Dardeen Blackwood."

Winters could not overcome his dry swallows.

"W-what are you doing here?"

She had a jar in her hands. She began to spoon honey from it. Apparently Lee's question carried an unintended meaning to her. "Why, I'm feeding my bees. They must be very hungry, too, seeing that they've come from so far away."

He'd been hearing again that hum of invisible bees. "So that's . . ."

What he started to say remained unsaid. Cannon Ball, acting as if he'd been stung by a bee, came near to leaping from under his rider. Winters barely hung on as Cannon Ball leaped, reared, pawed air, and plunged homeward.

**F**OLLOWING a midnight supper, Winters contemplated his beautiful wife across their small dining table. She had been among Forlorn Gap's earliest settlers. Murder had made her a young widow. Winters, after killing her husband's murderer in defense of his own life, had made her a wife again by marrying her himself.

"Myra," he told her in heartfelt admiration, "you grow more beautiful every day. I was a lucky man when I got you."

"Lee, you flatterer!" she chided with delight.

"Besides beauty, you've got sense. And you read books."

She studied him sincerely. "Best of all, Lee, I've got you for my husband. Without you to be with me in this faraway place, I'd die of loneliness. With you to protect, support and compliment me, I'm completely happy and unafraid of anything."

Something was on his mind to ask this lovely creature who read, dreamed, and listened to all manner of gossip. He considered how to begin. "Myra, you don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"Are you about to call me a ghost?"

"There are times when I wonder if you ain't just something pretty I've dreamed up, but as you probably guessed my curiosity has been aroused. Tonight Doc Bogannon mentioned Blackwood House."

Myra's eyes rounded. "Really?"

"Yeah. Doc says it's haunted."

"Well, of course, Lee."

"Then you do believe in ghosts. And you mean it sure enough is?"

"I thought everybody knew that Blackwood House is haunted."

"Humph! I reckon I've missed out on something. Tell me about it."

"A woman was murdered there."

"Maybe you'd better go farther back to begin."

"Oh, you want a complete history?"

"I reckon I do. It's embarrassing for man to live in a town and be so downright ignorant about it."

Myra regarded her hands absently. "Let's see now. First, her name was Dardeen—Dardeen Blackwood. Her husband was Dirk Blackwood. They came from St. Louis, though Dardeen herself was a country girl. A peculiar sort of girl she was, too, with a small white neck that contrasted so strikingly against her raven-black hair. But strangest of all, she loved bees."

"Bees?" Winters had started as if snatched from sleep. "What do you mean, bees?"

"It is hard to believe, truly," said Myra with a distant look. "Dardeen nevertheless had brought a colony of bees clear from Missouri. On warm days she would sit outdoors and watch them come and go, excited by their wonder and mystery. Then one day her beastly husband came home drunk, found her watching her lovely bees. In anger and spite, he built a bonfire and burned them. After that, Dardeen was sad, broody, disconsolate. For days she put out honey for those few bees, away when their hive was burned, that came back and wandered aimlessly. Dardeen talked to them, wept with them, it's said. Without a queen bee to keep them together, they dwindled until at last there was none."

"Then what?" Lee prompted.

"Well, let's see. It's been some time, you know."

"I do know."

"Dirk Blackwood had a good claim staked out, but he wouldn't work it. He made money, though. How, people could only guess. Finally he sold his claim and disappeared for weeks, leaving poor Dardeen with barely enough to keep off starvation. Then a stagecoach was robbed; its driver and gun-guard were killed; its box of gold bars was taken. Searchers must've suspected Dirk Blackwood. A trail led them to Forlorn Gap and to Blackwood House. But what they found was Dardeen. She was dead; someone had strangled her."

**R**ECOLLECTION began to return to Winters. Those events had occurred while he was dividing his time between Forlorn Gap and Brazerville. Dirk Blackwood, though darkly suspected of robbery, had never been on Winters'

list of wanted monkeys. Even so, his cold, maniacally cruel face, once seen, had remained unforgettable.

"Any notion of who murdered Dardeen?" Lee asked.

Myra's answer was immediate and certain. "Of course; naturally, it was Dirk."

"Naturally," Lee agreed. "But what makes you think so?"

"Well, it's a haunted house, isn't it?"

Winters gave that some thought. It was provoking, amusing, yet instinctively wise for her to come up with an answer like that. It was like saying *because*, in other words, *you figure it*.

Through most of what was left of that night, he puzzled over her answer. Blackwood House certainly was haunted; that he'd just seen for himself. It was haunted by Dardeen Blackwood's ghost. It was also haunted by bees. But how did those facts prove that Dirk Blackwood had murdered his wife in Blackwood House? Well, *because!*

Suddenly, at dawn, he sat erect in their bed. Myra, alarmed, sat up beside him. "Lee, what happened?"

"Nothing," he answered nervously. "Didn't you ever set up in bed without exactly knowing why?"

"I guess I have, really."

"Listen! Do you hear anything?"

Myra stilled. Then she laughed softly. "I guess our imaginations are playing tricks on us."

"Why?"

"Well, don't you hear them?"

"Hear what?"

"Why, bees, of course."

"Yeah, sure. I merely wanted to make sure I wasn't just going cuckoo."

"You really do hear them?"

"Never heard anything plainer in my life."

He got up and dressed. Myra followed, and they soon had breakfast.

He rode to his office afterwards, ran through pictures of wanted monkeys, then dropped in at Bogannon's saloon to inquire for mail.

That worried look which had been on Bogie's face was still there. He was alone, yet he had not seen Winters until he was spoken to.

"Any mail, Doc?"

**B**OGIE SWUNG round, startled. "Ah, it's you, Winters. Why, yes, there is mail. It should've

been brought over last midnight, but you will recall that I fudged on our guest by closing ten minutes early. Here." He handed Lee a letter addressed in Marshal Hugo Landers' barely legible handwriting.

Winters tore into it and read. *Dear Winters, Dirk Blackwood is out. That gold he's supposed to took from Elkhorn Stage three years ago was never found. Dirk will likely show up soon to get it. He had a crony that will probably be looking for Dirk, sort of to get even for a double-cross. Watch for both of them. This crony's name is Seth Olney. If you find that gold yourself, there's a thousand-dollar reward for you. Yours truly, Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

He handed it to Bogie. "Right interesting, Doc."

Bogie read it and handed it back. "As a coincidence, Winters, I saw your man Blackwood, alias Menefee, riding out as I came in. He was headed northeast."

"But he came in by stage."

"A horse can still be rented from Dezley's livery."

Five minutes later Winters was at Dezley's. Hiram Dezley was seated out front, whittling. He had a sunken place where an eye had been.

"Want to sell that horse, Winters?"

"Dezley," Winters replied, "all I want is to know where Dirk Blackwood said he was going when you rented him a horse."

Dezley spat and resumed his whittling. "Winters, what I'm told I treat as confidential."

"When it's asked of you," Winters reminded him coolly.

Dezley squinted upward. "How'd you know I wasn't asked this time?"

"Speak up, Dezley. Where was Blackwood going?"

"He said his name was Sand Menefee."

"You know as well as I do, he's Dirk Blackwood."

Dezley whittled slowly. "You guessed right, Winters. What's more, Blackwood didn't ask me to keep it confidential. I reckon maybe he sort of meant I shouldn't."

"All right?"

Dezley cast his thumb toward a towering region of rocks and cliffs. "Blackwood said he had a trip into Mongo Mountain; hinted he had some gold buried up there." He eyed Winters uncivilly. "There was another nosey feller here, askin' same as you where Blackwood went."

Winters' eyebrows lifted. "That so?"

"Nothing was ever more so. This feller said he was an old friend of Blackwood's. Sort of wanted to see him. Blackwood had took off up that westside trail by Buzzard Rock. It was that way this other feller went."

"Know this other fellow's name?"

"Yessir, matter of fact, I do, though he never mentioned it. Nor did he ask me to keep anything confidential. He was a shady character named Olney, and I'll bet my best saddle he was riding a stole horse." He spat again. "Sure you don't want to sell that big horse, Winters?"

Winters kneeed Cannon Ball into a quarter-turn. "Dezley, you're a right obligin' citizen." He held back a moment. "Just happened to think of something else, Dezley. You ain't seen any bees buzzin' around, I reckon?"

Dezley's mouth dropped open. His one eye grew wide. "Now, why did you ask me that, Winters?"

"Curiosity."

"Well, Winters, I ain't seen no bees, but I've sure heard 'em buzzin'. Do you reckon this town's gittin' ha'nted?"

Winters put his horse in motion, but called back, "Wouldn't be surprised, Dezley. Sure wouldn't."

**A**N HOUR later he heard a shot. He was then far up in Mongo, a wilderness of stone and cliff. One horse had been following another's hoof prints. After a careful advance, Winters found what he had expected to find, namely, a dead man and his nearby bewildered horse. As the deceased was not Blackwood, Winters figured he had to be Olney; but whoever he'd been, he was of little consequence now. Nevertheless, Winters roped his remains across his horse and headed them back toward Forlorn Gap.

Lee's interest then was in Blackwood's trail, which led him down mountainsides, into gorges and canyons, past noontime, through a grinding afternoon and, at last, into night's obscurity.

When Winters was again in Bogannon's saloon for a midnight drink, he was furious and disgusted with himself. "Doc, do you know something? Well, I'll tell you. I've been a long-eared mule. Dirk Blackwood left a hot trail into Mongo Mountain so's Seth Olney could follow and get hisself murdered. When that was done, Blackwood tricked me into following him all day and into night. And

why?"

Bogie eyed his wine glass and said worriedly, "I don't know, Winters, but I venture a guess it had something to do with bees."

"Yeah, bees," said Winters, his anger abating. He listened. "But I don't hear any bees. What's become of them?"

Bogie looked sweaty. "You've got me there," he said. "All day I heard them, not great swarms, as yesterday, but comparatively few, as if stragglers had become lost and were searching hither and yon, trying to catch up, trying to find some center toward which they might gravitate. I've had premonitions that they were on their way to some rendezvous, but for a purpose beyond my imagination. Then, shortly before your arrival, those humming sounds ceased; they passed as a wind passeth and is heard no more."

Bogie wiped his face with a handkerchief. Winters had never before seen him so long-faced.

"Doc, this morning I awoke with a strange feeling. Maybe you've had dreams like it, where a light shines in your face when there's no light around. Well, something like that struck me. I got it figured."

"Figured?"

"I guess it wasn't exactly my figuring. You remember when Dardeen Blackwood was found murdered in Blackwood House?"

"I remember it well."

"Dirk Blackwood done it."

"Ah! And how did you know that?"

"Well, Blackwood House is haunted, ain't it?"

"Hmmm!" Bogie mused in an effort to make some sense of that question. "I don't follow you, Winters."

"I reckon not, Doc. What's more, if I told you what I've been seeing and hearing, you'd think I'm crazy, which I sometimes think I am, myself."

"What are you getting at?"

"You said something about a rendezvous," Winters replied distantly. "I think that's it." He looked at his watch. "It's midnight, Doc."

Bogie sprang up and hastily prepared for closing. He thrust a six-gun under his belt. "I'm becoming a lost and bewildered sheep, Winters."

Outside, Winters caught his arm. "Doc, have you got nerve enough to come with me?"

Bogie stiffened with a false show of bravery. "I never lacked courage, sir. Where to?"

"To Blackwood House."

"Well, now . . ."

"To Blackwood House, Doc."

Bogie hesitated, then yielded reluctantly. "All right, Winters, to Blackwood House."

WITH CANNON BALL in tow, they walked hurriedly to Kalany Street and had come within a short distance of their destination, when Bogie grasped Lee's arm.

"Listen, Winters! Do you hear them?"

Winters tried to swallow, but couldn't. Yes, he'd heard them. Bees! They hummed as if millions of them were passing overhead, their tone rising on a musical pitch, higher and higher, as if they were going at a swiftly accelerated speed, at last so tremendously fast that sound of movement became pitched too high for human ears to register. So many there seemed to be that even by starlight they should have been visible as a moving cloud, yet nothing was seen.

How long that humming continued Winters could only guess, but it must have been many seconds. Their departure left an eerie silence. Hours before, they had gathered, perhaps in response to some mysterious summons. Now they were gone, as Bogie might have said, *as a wind that passeth and is heard no more*.

His face wet with sweat, Winters moved ahead. "Come, Doc; if I have it figured right, you're going to see something you won't ever forget."

Bogie came alongside in exhibition of exaggerated courage. "Winters, strange things have happened in this town and its environs. Until now I've been unwilling to admit it, but I can't deny it any longer. Those bees! They were here on some fateful mission. A power beyond our knowledge, one toward which we grope desperately but cannot quite touch, called them here for a purpose. But what?"

"You'll find out soon," said Winters. Suddenly he flung out an arm to stop their progress. "Hold, Doc. There's Blackwood House."

"A light's in it."

Winters dropped his horse's reins. He advanced in a breathless trance, Bogie doggedly at his side. That light which Bogie had seen filtered through window shutters, which had been closed. Blackwood House gave forth light, but no sound. Its front door was closed, but it opened and sagged back on squeaking hinges when Winters had touched its latch and shoved against it.

THEY STOOD inside and gazed in awe at what they beheld. On a shelf a lamp burned brightly. A man's hat lay upturned in a corner. Fragments of a man's shirt were scattered indiscriminately. One shred even hung upon a high, rusty nail. Fragments of trousers were likewise scattered. Several floorboards had been lifted out of place. From underneath, earth had been cast up by a shovel revealing a gold-shipment chest, still closed.

In a distorted, agonized posture upon planks that showed signs of terrific struggle, lay Dirk Blackwood's naked body.

"As I figured it," said Winters.

"What killed him, Winters?" asked Bogie, his voice little more than a strained whisper.

Winters stepped cautiously round Blackwood's corpse. With lamp in hand, he dropped to his knees for a close look. His voice was dry, raspy. "As I figured it, Doc. He's been stung to death by bees. In fighting them, he tore his clothes to rags."

Bogie got down and stared. "Incredible!" he gasped. "But it's there to be seen. Each tiny pink spot you see on his skin is really a puncture, as an insect sting. They are so close together, so many, as to be absolutely countless."

Winters put pieces of thought together, rejected every inner suggestion that he was merely dreaming. "She was here last night, Doc."

"She?"

"Dardeen Blackwood."

"But she's been dead at least three years—more than three."

"She was here, Doc. Last night after I left you at your house, I rode past here. Dardeen was at a window, putting honey in a dish. I talked with her;

she said she was feeding her bees. Doc, she and her bees came back. They had what you call a rendezvous."

Bogie's voice had sunk to a dry whisper. "It's incredible!"

"But there's one thing I can't figure," said Winters.

"As if you could figure anything about what's happened here!" scoffed Doc.

Winters went on undaunted. "From what I've seen of bees, when one stings you, it loses its stinger—leaves it in its victim. Here there are no lost stingers."

"No?" said Bogie. "Look in Blackwood's forehead."

Winters looked. There, centering his forehead, was a ragged mass of pinhead size from which a tiny dark-colored lancet extended downward into dead flesh.

"And there!" exclaimed Bogie, pointing again.

On a floorboard a few inches from Blackwood's remains, a honeybee crawled laboriously, its entrails dragging where its stinger had been torn out of its body.

Winters stared at it for many seconds. It had, indeed, come to a strange get-together; it had come to kill, and it was going to die with its victim.

Bogie likewise stared, then, as if it meant some sort of triumph for him, he exclaimed, "Ha! But what about all these other stings? No stingers were left in them, eh? What about it, Winters?"

Winters stared at him, worried about Bogie's sanity, as well as his own. "Yeah," he said, "what about it?" He got up and replaced his lamp on its shelf. "That, Doc," he added, "is one for you to figure."