

THE THREE FATES

by Lon Williams



Lee Winters had seen many strange sights, but these three gents somehow topped them all . . .

It was a spooky night when Deputy Marshal Lee Winters met a man who knew what was What, a man who knew when was When, and a man who knew where was Where...

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters had heard a rumor that one Nick Olfinger, new on his list of wanted monkeys, was hiding in a weird, lonely valley west of Forlorn Gap known as Terre des Revenantes—land of ghosts. Near mid-day in that valley he pulled up in nervous surprise before a rounded hill or mound where, on its southern face, fresh earth had been thrown up from a pit. His horse Cannon Ball snorted uneasily and Winters, warned of impending action, tightened bridle and knee holds.

Then he saw an object which caused his scalp to creep and his hat to become loose on his head. On a scraped-out shelf of earth bare bones had been assembled to form a human skeleton. Winters and his horse were of one mind then, but before thought could be translated into homeward action, an apparition appeared, three ghosts marching in step over this ancient mound's curved summit.

They carried a long box. Two held handles on opposite sides near its front; their companion supported its rear. Tall

and slim, dressed in long black coats and small black hats, had they looked slightly more human Lee would have accepted them as a trio of undertakers. Men never wore more funereal expressions, and that long box they carried would have served handsomely as a coffin.

They put their burden down, faced Winters, bowed as if performing a ceremonial, and said in unison, "Good-day to you, sir."

Winters gave a start. "Huh! I mean, howdy."

One of them said, "We did not mean to startle you. I trust you will forgive us. We are three distinguished and scholarly Englishmen from Oxford. Permit me, sir, I am Sir Edward Kiewit, Knight of Tombs and Hidden Secrets." He indicated his nearer companion, a dignified gentleman and, his longer nose excepted, much like Sir Edward.

This one bowed graciously. "I am Sir Frederick Peers, Knight of Red Garters, Round Tables and Spoons, sir, knighted by her young and gracious majesty, Queen Victoria, long may she reign."

Number three lifted heavy eyebrows at Winters. His eyes, deep wells of darkness, gave Lee cold shivers. This one bowed less ostentatiously than had his companions. His voice had that depth and resonance to be heard when someone spoke in a vast empty hall. "I," he said, "am Sir George Yonderlook, Knight of Doom and Finality." He indicated with a flabby gesture his two companions. "We three are specially gifted, in that we commune with spirits."

"And," said Sir Long Nose, "we walk and talk with those long dead."

"Moreover," said Sir Edward Kiewit, "where there are those who would hide their secrets from us, we desecrate their graves, dig up their bones, expose them to public view, and then sell them, as one

might sell a cord of firewood, or a pumpkin at Hallowe'en. As arbiters of human destiny, we also occupy roles as inexorable as Time, as cold as northern winds and as unconquerable as shifting sands. In that awe-inspiring triumvirate, I am *What*."

Sir Frederick Peers drew back his emaciated shoulders. "I am *Where*."

"And I," rumbled Sir George Yonderlook, "am *When*."

They recited in unison, "Together we are What, Where and When."

Sir Edward pronounced gravely, "When I say what, it is What's what. It can't be anything else."

Sir Frederick declared gloomily, "When I say where, it is Where's where. It can't be anywhere else."

"And," said Sir George, "when I say when, it is When's when. When's when is now. And that ends all. It is finality."

WINTERS was sorry he'd wandered into this scary place. He was out of sorts, too, with nervous, sweaty anger. "To me, you bozoes look like a flock of crows and talk like loonies. What have you got in that box?"

Sir George flung up his eyebrows again. "You have not told us your name, sir. However, judging by that tarnished piece of metal on your vest, I judge you are some sort of constable hereabouts."

Being called a constable and having his badge belittled, stirred Lee's wrath. "I'm Deputy Marshal Lee Winters of Forlorn Gap, under orders from Marshal Hugo Landers of Brazerville to keep an eye peeled for wanted monkeys, wild-eyed loonies, and apes with odd ways of making a livin.' I said, what have you got in that box?"

Sir George treated his demand as if he hadn't heard it. Nevertheless, he gave indirect answer. "By profession, we three

are archaeologists.”

“Arkie what?” gasped Winters.

“Ah,” sighed Sir George, “I fear we cast our pearls before swine when we endeavor to explain even so common a word to such an uncouth, unlettered, slim-shanked nobody. Let us to our work, my brothers.”

“Look here,” responded Winters, “according to what’s in books, we fit two wars to keep Englishmen out of this country. If you gravediggers don’t watch out, we’ll fight another. What have you got in that box?”

Sir Edward nodded at his brothers in art. “Brethren, this man’s mind seems incapable of more than one single fixation at a time. As to what is in our box, he will not be satisfied until he is shown. Let’s open its lid, Sir Frederick.”

Sir Frederick bent to unfasten a latch. “Do you speak as What?”

“I do, indeed, and you are spoken to as Where.”

Winters lowered his gunhand in expectation of violence.

What and Where each unfastened a latch. Slowly their box lid was lifted and turned back on its hinges.

But an instant before Winters could glimpse its contents, Cannon Ball snorted and jumped in wild fear. With bridle-bit clamped hard in his teeth, he struck for home. Lee, unseated, clung madly to saddle and mane, managed to recover and remount in a quick, flying leap.

A good mile had been put behind them before he again had Cannon Ball under control. By then his curiosity about what was in that box had been whipped down by other considerations. He figured he’d got away just two seconds before when was when. Right now he had no urge to go back either.

TWO EVENINGS later, Forlorn Gap had settled into its eerie quiet, except for one enlivened spot. That exception was in Doc Bogannon’s saloon, only institution of its kind that remained in a town which once roared and reeked with barrooms. There men sat at card tables, drank whiskey and played poker. Some sweated under an ever-present danger of abrupt death.

Suddenly at a table a middle-sized red-faced, red-haired player yelled, “Don’t touch it!” With jarring, furious speed he was on his feet, a forty-five in each hand. “I’m taking that pile. If anybody don’t think so, let him show his speed.”

A well-dressed, mild-mannered stranger shook his head calmly. “Bart Gosling, I had a royal flush.”

“A quick draw beats a royal flush any day,” Gosling returned tightly. “Want me to prove it? If you do, just touch that money.”

Nobody touched it. Gosling holstered his lefthand gun and scooped up his loot. His recent playmates got up and strolled quietly out.

Doc Bogannon had looked on from behind his bar. Bogie himself was large, with dark hair, splendid head and intellectual demeanor, a man of mystery who lived contentedly with his half-breed Shoshone wife, owned and operated a saloon as his only visible means of support.

What he saw, he regarded with mild interest and philosophical understanding. Forlorn Gap was a crossroads town, with Goodlett Hotel as its only house and Bogie’s saloon as its only place of recreation. Here strangers came and went, both good and bad, brilliant and stupid, rich and poor, lucky and unlucky. Whatever their breed, they had his tolerant sympathy. They were men, all journeying to meet their destinies, in part of their own

making, in part designed and executed by forces not of their handiwork.

Bart Gosling, thought Bogie, as that man of fury came forward, was of an unlucky breed. Such men usually fell into pits they had dug for others, died when they least expected it because they were never so good as they regarded themselves and never so clever but that some crafty madman was cleverer.

"What would you have, sir?" Bogie asked politely as Gosling leaned against his bar and stared at him arrogantly.

"Whiskey," Gosling stormed. "What did you think I wanted?"

"Whiskey," Bogie replied politely.

"Then why did you ask me what I wanted? Why didn't you just pour me some whiskey?"

"In my cloistered youth I was taught never to be presumptuous," Bogie replied. He set a glass, filled it and stood his bottle beside it.

GOSLING tossed down his drink and helped himself to another. He put down his empty glass and leered at Bogie. "Charge it," he spewed. After a look of insolent defiance, he walked back and forth, kicked over a table surrounded by drinkers, came back and filled his glass again. "Charge it, I said; or didn't you hear me?"

Bogie was about to tell him he kept no charge accounts, when his batwings swung in and a lean, weatherbeaten, dark-mustached, familiar personage tramped in.

"Winters!" exclaimed Bogie. He lowered his voice as Winters strode up. "Winters, am I glad to see you!"

Winters planked down a coin. "Wine, Doc."

"Wine it is, Winters." Bogie quickly filled a glass, looked at Winters searchingly, and lifted his brows. "You look peeved about something, Winters.

Has your wife given you a scolding? Or did your latest wanted monkey get away?"

Winters leaned forward. "Doc, I want to ask you something."

"By all means."

Winters indicated his official badge. "Doc, do you see this star?"

"How could I help seeing anything so bright and shining?"

"Are you sure it don't look tarnished?"

"A star in heaven couldn't be more flawless."

"All right," said Winters.

"Now, let me ask you a question," said Bogie. "Has your wife berated you for neglecting your badge? Or did she shine it for you, then berate you for neglecting to thank her?"

"Neither," said Winters. "Two days ago my badge was made fun of by three snooty Englishmen." He glanced left, then looked at Bogie. He jerked his head at a freckled redhead who stood a few feet away and regarded Winters from contemptuous, whiskey-reddened eyes. "Who's he, Doc?"

Bogie alerted instantly. "My apology, Winters. I want you to meet one of my newest and most esteemed friends, Mr. Bartemus Gosling. Mr. Gosling, Deputy Winters."

Neither showed any pleasure at this courteous introduction.

Gosling spat at a spot midway between them. "Deputy marshals ain't my favorite people. Fact is, I heartily despises 'em."

Winters leaned his back against Bogie's bar. "You know, Doc, this feller reminds me of when I was in second grade in school down in Trinity Valley, in Texas. We had a teacher named Watlington Jones. Us scholars all called him High-pockets. One day I come across a word in my reader I didn't know what it was. So up front I goes to ask High-pockets.

"I puts my finger under it and I says,

‘What’s that word, Professor?’ Old Highpockets takes a good long look and says, ‘Young feller, that word is go-sling.’ Would you believe it, Doc, I was ridin’ herd on a thousand steers in West Texas before I ever knowed that word was not go-sling at all; it was gosling.”

Red Bart’s inflamed eyes gleamed. “Are you poking fun at my name, Winters?”

“No,” said Winters. “I was merely hinting that, your name, pronounced another way, contains a bit of advice to its owner.”

“I don’t need advice, Winters. I told you I despises deputy marshals. Maybe you didn’t hear me. It could become mighty unhealthy for you around here.”

BY AND LARGE, Winters realized that he lived a scared life. Yet some hidden spring of courage poured steadiness into his blood when going got rough. “Being a deputy marshal is right unhealthy, so I’m told,” he said casually. “But I’m still alive, Gosling, and in fair to middling health. Does that mean anything to you?”

Gosling thought it over. Discretion tempered his valor. He spat again. “Every dog has his day, Winters. Sooner or later, you’ll have yours.”

Winters, aware that Gosling had cooled off, turned to Bogie and put down another coin. “A drink for your new and esteemed friend, Doc. I’m late for supper. Good-night.”

Gosling waited until Winters was out then poured himself another drink. “Charge it,” he sneered. “I don’t accept charity from no lawman.” He strode back and forth. Again he kicked over a table. When objection was raised by its users, he snapped hands to both guns. “All right, want to do something about it?” To show how tough he was, he kicked over still

another table.

Then he turned and stared as Bogie’s batwings swung and three tall, gloomy strangers marched in, one behind another, all in step, all dressed alike in long black coats and round black hats. Only their faces were markedly different. One face was large and moon-like; one was centered by an extraordinarily long nose; one was elongated and thin. They marched as if by prearrangement to an unoccupied table, sat down and assumed attitudes of waiting.

Bogie hurried round. “At your service, gentlemen.”

One said, “I am Sir Edward Kiewit. My companions are Sir Frederick Peers and Sir George Yonderlook. We would have wine, my good man.”

Bogie bowed respectfully. “Wine it is, my valiant sirs.” He backed away, turned, promptly came back with glasses and a bottle. He said as he poured wine, “It is not uncommon for an Englishman or so to visit here. But three English knights—ah, that *is* a distinction.”

Sir George tossed his heavy eyebrows upward, then lowered one of them. “We are archaeologists, my good man. Though an archaeologist retains his nationality for what it may be worth, he is truly a man of all climes and places, interested in all times, as well, alive in all accepted ways, yet forever touching fingers with death. He is an explorer of tombs, an interpreter of things that were and are no more.”

“You are a most venerable breed of men,” declared Bogie. “But what tombs do you find to explore in this jumble of mountains?”

“What we are given to know,” Sir Edward Kiewit proclaimed in a melancholy voice, “is not given to ordinary men. As for me, I am he who knows what’s what.”

“And I,” announced Sir Frederick

gloomily, "am he who knows where's where."

Sir George nodded. "And I am he who knows when's when."

Bogie's own eyebrows lifted. "Most interesting," he said nervously.

Bart Gosling had sauntered to their table. He put one foot in a vacant chair and eyed them with drunken contempt. "You fellers sound like a bunch of squirrels. Can you play poker?"

They looked at one another with lively interest and nodded.

Sir George said resonantly, "We merely dropped in for wine, a bit for our stomachs' sake. We could play poker, if we were of present mind to do so; indeed, we could take all you have in one short evening."

"I've got a thousand smackers which says you can't," Gosling bragged arrogantly. He touched his sixguns significantly. "And I've got a couple of powder-pushers here which says you won't."

SIR GEORGE and his companions exchanged eyebrow talk.

Sir Frederick pinched his long nose. "No, friend Gosling. We adhere to original intentions. However, we should deem it an honor to drink with one so daring. Wine or whiskey, sir?"

Gosling eased into a chair. "Whiskey."

Sir Frederick nodded at Bogie. "A quart of whiskey, my good man."

Bogie responded, but with misgiving. He figured something was going to happen to his esteemed friend Gosling, and he hated to think of what it might be. However, he had never held himself in general terms as his brother's keeper. In this particular instance, fraternal instinct was so low as to be practically nil.

A few minutes later he saw them escorting Gosling away, one walking

before him, one on each side. Those beside him gave him physical support, which indicated to Bogie that Gosling was soaking drunk.

Outside, refreshed by night air, Gosling roused what remained of his own power and demanded where they were taking him.

"To your long home," replied Sir Edward. "When a man is down, as you are, forced to place his fate in other hands, there is no substitute for friends. You are especially blessed, in that you have three. We three are taking you to where you can rest and sleep. Aye! and sleep."

"Where is my home?" demanded Gosling.

"A man's home is where he rests and sleeps," said Sir George.

Gosling was dreamily aware of being led by moonlight to a vehicle to which were hitched two splendid black horses.

"Our carriage," announced Yonderlook.

"Looks like a blasted hack to me," Gosling protested drunkenly. "I don't need no hack. Take your stinking hands off me. I got a room at Goodlett Hotel."

Kiewit and Peers seized his arms and bound them behind his back. "When we would do one a favor," said Peers, "we expect cooperation, not resistance." When Gosling began to kick at their shins, they likewise bound his legs. In short order they relieved him of money and guns, lifted him up and laid him down in a long pine box mattress with a few straws and filled with vile odors.

"Help!" Gosling screamed.

But a lid was slammed down and latched, so that his screams were confined within their own alcoholic mist. Then began a furious, clattering journey, full of jars, jolts and bounces, sobering and horrifying in their effects. Horses and hack hove to a miserable eternity later, and

Gosling's narrow prison was lifted from its swaying carriage and dropped upon more solid support.

"Let me out of here!" he yelled.

"Of course," a ghostly voice responded. "That is what we intend to do."

IT WAS NOT done immediately, however. Gosling next felt himself being lifted, carried up a steep incline, over a summit, and down on its farther side. Once more he was dropped. Then his box lid was turned back.

He gazed upward at a sky filled with bright stars. "It's a good thing you opened up," he said, his own voice sounding flat and unreal. "If it's a joke you want, you'll get it. Just wait till I get on my feet."

They turned his box over and dumped him out on his face. With rough dispatch they lashed him from head to feet to a stout plank then turned him, face-up.

"Now," rumbled Yonderlook, "what have you to say, most unconvincing braggart?"

Gosling laughed crazily. Of course this was only one of his liquor-soaked nightmares. He'd wake up, and it would be over. He heard himself say in that hazy, torturing land of dreams, "What are you going to do with me?"

"Ah," replied Yonderlook, "being archaeologists, we plunder as thieves among these ancient sepulchers. But we are honest thieves. We take their unfeeling dead, but we pay them back in kind, bone for bone."

Kiewit said, "We are three fates, so to speak. I am What. When What says what, it is What's what, and there can be no fate but death."

"And I," declared Peers, "am Where. When Where says where, it is Where's where, and fate can overtake you nowhere but here."

"And I," said Yonderlook, "am When.

When When says when, it is When's when, and when is now, with doom and with finality. Let us to our work, my brothers."

Gosling did not scream. He laughed. He was so glad this was only a dream. He dreamed he was dropped into a pit, that dirt was scraped in a flood upon him. But he'd had worse dreams. He was not afraid. He was about to smother, but often he'd been in that state just before waking. Yet he must wake soon. He must wake. . .

WINTERS had late supper, yet not so late as to deny him precious minutes with his beautiful wife before a fireplace in their cozy cottage.

After Myra had briefly watched him, she said, "Lee, why do you keep polishing your deputy-marshal badge?"

He held it up for inspection. "Reason enough," he replied positively. "A snooty loony posing as an English archaeologist called it a tarnished piece of metal. I didn't like it."

Myra was curious. "Archaeologist?"

"Right. But don't ask me what one is. Only thing I know is, more than anything else in nature they looked like buzzards."

"Why, Lee!" Myra exclaimed. "Archaeologists are scholarly people."

"What do they do for a living?"

"From what I've read, they usually work for universities and museums. They study old things, especially old tombs and ruins of ancient times and cities. They dig."

"They do, don't they?" said Winters.

"Well, yes."

"And rob graves?"

"Not just any grave. Old ones, like tombs of Egypt. It's for education. They dig up old records, some written on stones, or on clay tablets, or on walls of temples."

"And people?"

"Yes, they dig up people, too.

Especially in Egypt. You'd be surprised at how well preserved those dead people are. Why, in Egypt they've found mummies, that is, preserved bodies, so lifelike after five thousand years that people of their time, if living now, would recognize them."

"Yeah, I begin to remember now. Years ago I heard a man named McKenzie down in Amarillo tell about mummies he saw. Why, McKenzie said, some of them mummies was so real and natural looking, if you'd give 'em whiskey they could've set up and talked."

"Now, Lee," Myra chided good-naturedly, "you're being facetious. But where did you see an archaeologist?"

"It wasn't just one; it was three. I saw 'em in Ghost Valley. They had a pit dug in an old Injun mound. One of them knows what's what; another, where's where. Sir George Yonderlook knows when's when, and when he says when you'd better watch out."

MYRA WAS thrilled. "Lee, I think you're only teasing. But if there are famous people so close as that, we ought to invite them in for a visit."

Winters took a final look at his badge and pinned it on his vest. "Good idea. Might have 'em for supper. There's something I'd like to know first."

"Know?"

"Yeah," he said, and looked worried. "I'd like to know what was in that box."

"Box?"

"It was a long box, sort of like a coffin."

"Coffin!"

"And they carried it like it was heavy. Not away from that mound, but right on over its skyline and down to a pit they'd dug. Do archaeologists sometimes put bodies in them old tombs, or do they always only take 'em out?"

"Horrors! They only take them out."

After a thoughtful silence, Winters gave his wife a sidewise look. "Still want to get acquainted with 'em?"

Myra studied a moment. "Yes," she said wistfully. "I'm sure I'd like to meet them."

Winters could sort of understand Myra's feelings. Those fellows really were interesting vultures. Nevertheless, he hoped they'd never be seen again in his bailiwick. He'd hate to shoot 'em, but he might have to. Once he'd seen a white crow. Had a chance to bust its feathers with a shotgun, too. But he'd let it go. In his opinion, such oddities had a spicy effect on life. If everybody looked and acted alike and were all of one moral pattern, existence would get mighty dull. *Besides*, he told himself, *it ain't every day you meet a bozo who knows what's what.*

INDIRECTLY, because of a reward poster from Marshal Hugo Landers, he got interested in those archaeologists again.

He took his poster to Doc Bogannon and laid it on Bogie's bar. "Know that feller?"

Bogie studied it. "Well, now, I see so many strangers, ranging from tree-swinging monkeys on up to college professors, it's hard to remember all of them."

"This one was sort of special," said Winters. "Redheaded. As freckled as a guinea hen's egg. Carried two guns. Name was Bartemus Gosling. Said he despised deputy marshals."

"Ah!" Bogie exclaimed. "Now I remember. Wanted me to open a charge account for his drinks. He also kicked over my tables."

"He also murdered a couple of travelers near Brazerville, and he's wanted in Missouri for horse-stealing."

Bogie remembered something vital at last. "Now I've got it. That same evening when you met this Gosling, three rather mysterious and singular looking strangers came here to imbibe a bit for their stomachs' sakes."

"Monkeys who knowed what's what?"

"And where's where?"

"And when's when?"

Bogie nodded and wrinkled his forehead. "Sir Eddie, Sir Freddie and Sir George. I have it now. They took your man Gosling away with them. What they did with him, I wouldn't know. Speculation as to his fate is something my mind dislikes to dwell upon."

"When have you seen those three loonies?"

"Last evening. They've become regular customers." Bogie smiled ailingly. "They even invited me to visit them. It seems they are doing research work of some sort hereabouts."

"Yeah," said Winters dryly. "They're archaeologists."

A day of hard riding brought him back that night, tired and thirsty. When again he stood by Bogie's bar for his nip of wine, Bogie leaned close.

"They're here, Winters."

"Who's here?" Winters asked.

Bogie answered cautiously, "Eddie, Freddie and George. Oh-oh, wait a minute. Here comes somebody else."

A handsome dark-haired stranger of about forty approached, looking down his nose at things in general. Winters noted his diamond shirt studs, figured they were as big as buckshot and that their owner was a rich Easterner.

"Gentlemen," this prosperous looking newcomer said on a sarcastic note, and threw a contemptuous glance at Bogannon.

Bogie nodded graciously. "Pleasure has so far eluded us, I fear. I am Doc

Bogannon. My good friend here is Deputy Marshal Lee Winters."

"I *should* be delighted," responded their visitor, though his tone proclaimed that he was not delighted at all. "If it matters, I am Rockford Covington. You'd probably refer to me privately as an Eastern plutocrat. I'm much more than that, however. I'm a famous globe-trotter, explorer, adventurer, and commentator on human affairs."

"Indeed," said Bogie. "You look all that you say you are. Would you have a drink?"

"Not just now, sir," said Covington. "Presently I am interested in your, what you call, lawman. I've read about Western lawmen and what a virulent breed they're supposed to be. I must say, however, I didn't expect to find one looking so insignificant and scrawny. Now, if Deputy Winters were only as bright and shining as his badge, I should not return East so disillusioned."

WINTERS turned his back on Bogie's bar and hoisted his elbows. He was sorry he'd done so much badge-polishing, but be-confound if a man could please everybody.

"Rocky," he drawled, "do you know what it is that makes a man look scrawny?"

"I'd be delighted to learn," Covington responded loftily.

"Well, sir, it's this here Western wind and sun. We've got whole passels of Easterners out here, so dried up and shrunk they crawl around on their bellies. We call them horned toads."

Covington's mouth lifted at one corner. "Charming!" he declared with dry sarcasm. "Bogannon, serve this yokel a drink at my expense."

"I'm obliged," said Winters, "but I'd be pleased to buy you one."

"It's quite presumptuous of you to think I'd let you," said Covington. He shifted his attention. "Just now my interest is in characters. Really, I came West to escape boredom for a while. Frankly, however, I find your country excruciatingly drab, dirty, and unexciting. Elkhorn Pass and Pangborn Gulch are great stinks, and this deserted village of yours is no more exciting than a dead cat. Not one what you call shoot-out have I witnessed since my arrival five days ago. I'd see more of interest on New York's Bowery any hour, any day or night."

Bogie spread his long-fingered hands, palms up. "We Westerners have been shamelessly maligned by Eastern scandal-mongers. There's no more civilized spot on earth than here. Right, Winters?"

"Right," said Winters. "If you'll excuse me now, I'll run along home. Got to eat my porridge and then hold my wife's yarn while she knits. Good-night, gentlemen."

TWO EVENINGS later, Winters rode homeward by moonlight from Elkhorn Pass, where a wild-eyed gunman named Branton had resisted arrest. That was a shoot-out Rocky Covington would have enjoyed—badman and a deputy marshal walking toward each other down a dusty street, drama in pure Western style.

At a noise Winters pulled up and cased his horse into a cove. What sounded like a mad runaway approached from toward Forlorn Gap. In almost no time a hack drawn by two black horses whirled past. Two men occupied its only seat. A third sat behind them on a long box. They leaned forward, bounced and held onto their hats.

Once more Winters wanted to know what was in that box. This time it was an angry, compelling desire. He brought Cannon Ball around and pursued. A mile

up Elkhorn Road there was an old trail that ran southward into Terre des Revenantes. Team and hack swept and skidded into this trail and plunged onward.

Down in Ghost Valley they stopped by their Indian mound. Before Winters got within hailing distance, they had unloaded and with their box marched up, over, and down out of sight. He swung left, took roundings and came upon them by an open pit, where they had put their box down.

He caught them by surprise, dismounted, lifted his sixgun, and aimed at hip-level. "Now, you buzzards, what have you got in that box? This time I'm your man that knows what's what, and when."

Those sepulchral characters eyed one another.

"What!" snapped one.

"Where!" said another.

Winters cocked his gun. "Hold right there, unless you want to die."

Yonderlook's lips moved, but no sound came out. He stared at Winters' gun, which carried especial menace for him.

Winters nodded at Yonderlook's companions. "Open your box."

Sir Frederick and Sir Edward bent to obey, but hesitated as groans sounded creepily. Sir George lent encouragement. "When's when is not yet, my knightly friends. Do as Officer Winters has bidden."

They obeyed.

Premonition had already told Winters that somebody alive was in their coffinlike contraption. He told himself that he needed but one guess as to who it was. Doc Bogannon would have said, *Irony takes care of snobs and braggarts.*

When their box lid had been thrown back, a moonlit figure groaned to a sitting position.

"Well!" exclaimed Winters. "Am I surprised! Is it really you, Covington?"

Rocky was bound hand and foot and had a gag in his mouth. He tried to get to his feet but failed. His effort to talk was in vain. Winters obliged by jerking off Rocky's gag.

"It's about time," Covington cried furiously. "Winters, what kind of law and order are you upholding in this heathenish country? Make yourself useful and get these ropes off my arms and legs. A fine officer you are!"

Yonderlook's voice rumbled deeply, "Officer Winters, would you be pleased to have me proclaim that it is now When's when?"

"Just hold your rope tight, while I give it some study," Winters replied. "Seems I remember some smart remarks about my badge made by you fellers, including Rocky Covington."

"Winters," Covington seethed, "if you don't get these ropes off me, I'll report you to proper authorities and have you fired. You're as great a disgrace as this dried-up country you live in. Now that I think back a little, I'm satisfied you've been part and parcel of this dirty, lowdown prank that's been played on me." Rocky bounced and twisted, but was unable to get up. "Winters, trifling excuse for a human being though you are, release me. Delay another second, and it will cost you your job."

WINTERS drew a hand across his mustache. "You've just made me think of a problem, Rocky. I've got these

three unofficial undertakers that's to be took care of. Only way I can get them to town is in their hack. Now, seeing as there ain't no extra horse for you to ride, I reckon you can go back like you come."

"Winters!" screamed Covington.

Winters also screamed. "Yonderlook, it's When's when. Slam that lid shut and haul this braggart back to town, same as how you fetched him here."

While Covington screamed and threatened, Yonderlook and his brethren battened him down, hoisted his prison and carried it up, over and down to their waiting team and vehicle. Winters, on Cannon Ball, followed.

In seconds they were off on a wild ride, Sir Frederick and Sir George up front, Sir Edward seated on Rocky's long box. They reached Elkhorn Road and headed east.

Winters, riding at a lope behind them, giggled up close and yelled, "What's wrong with your royal highnesses? Can't you go any faster?"

"Aye," Yonderlook shouted back, "wind was never faster than we can go. Hi-yee!" Lashing whip and slapping lines set up a hurricane of clattering hoofs and rumbling, bouncing wheels.

Winters pulled his hat down tight and pursued. Those blacks up ahead were tornadoes when it came to speed, and Cannon Ball had to stretch out. "Faster!" Winters yelled. Then he said to himself, *Most likely tomorrow I'll be ashamed of this, but right now I'm enjoying it a sight.*