

LEE WINTERS STORY

by LON WILLIAMS



There was nothing in Deputy Marshal Winters' experience to match what he went through in Tallyho Canyon...

MARK OF THE WAMPUS CAT

DEPUTY Marshal Lee Winters reined up in somber, rugged mountain country fifteen miles southeast of Forlorn Gap and considered which of two shadowy, forbidding routes to take on his night ride home. Easier going called for a right-hand cut-back to Cracked Kettle Creek, thence northward to

Brazerville Road. A shorter, but more awesome route, lay westward by way of Little Dog Creek, thence through eerie Tallyho Canyon to Alkali Flat.

Out of consideration for his horse, he defied intuitive warning and turned west. Almost immediately he began to hear whisperings and to be tormented by a

feeling that he was not traveling alone. Cannon Ball likewise sensed strangeness. When his steel shoes struck hard rocks, they gave out flinty sounds that echoed from cliffs like small bells. His body trembled. It was that kind of fear in him that did not explode into violent action, but gripped him in helpless submission, carried him along in strong arms of cold terror.

Winters had been on a two-day search for a wanted monkey named Jenks Cahern, thought by Marshal Hugo Landers of Brazerville to be hiding in this wild canyon country that d rolled darkly northeastward from Rocky Point. Plutonia it was called by old timers, Winters now remembered; by reputation it was a land of ghosts. Winters had not overtaken his wanted monkey, but he had worn himself out in trying to; now, as darkness drew round him like a black fog, his usual alertness and resistance to fear melted away. Extreme weariness produced increasing physical numbness, mental indifference and spiritual resignation. That same unresisting fear he had recognized in Cannon Ball settled upon him. He moved not of his own volition, but in a strange embrace to whatever destiny his night journey had in store for him.

An hour after dark, Winters reached Little Dog and headed upstream. Aside from a prospective starlight ride across Alkali Flat, this route promised to take him through other regions of undesirable reputation, by points believed to be haunted. One of those points lay on Little Dog Creek, where trapper Bob Hunter had lived. Hunter, known in legend as Lost Robert, had been killed, so it was told, by a war party of northern Cheyennes. At any rate, his cabin had been burned, and a scalped, mutilated body had been found in Little Dog.

Winters, though resigned to fate, felt

sweaty and wiped his face with his left sleeve. Cannon Ball, too, began to manifest uneasiness, to hesitate while aggravated tremors shook him. Then, at a turn, he half-squatted, and Winters, from long habit rather than design, snapped his gun-hand down.

Where Bob Hunter's cabin had stood, among its very ruins indeed, a man sat by a campfire. At first Winters thought he'd found his wanted monkey. His approach, accordingly, was cautious. But he'd been mistaken. An unperturbed stranger of small stature sat upon a stone and quietly prepared his evening meal.

He looked up, and his bearded, outdoor face rippled into an expression of pleasure. "Howdy, Winters," he said.

Cannon Ball stopped again. His body quaked.

Winters was surprised to hear his own name spoken so familiarly. He said, dry-lipped, "Howdy, stranger."

"No stranger, Winters. I'm plain Bob Hunter, better known hereabouts, I reckon, as Lost Robert."

Winters grabbed his hat which, inexplicably, had shifted suddenly. He swallowed tightly. "You can't be Bob Hunter; he was murdered by Injuns, many years ago."

"Heap of folks thought so," returned Lost Robert. "But you can't believe half what you hear, sometimes even less of what you see."

Lost Robert had meat broiling on a spit, a coffee pot steaming nearby. Thin, browned hoecake lay in cut, crisp-looking pieces on a flat rock.

Winters said fearfully, "Maybe what I see is a ghost. A dead body sure was pulled out of Little Dog Creek, and nobody in this country ever saw you again from that day to this. Where've you been hiding?"

"Round here, mostly," said Lost

Robert. "But that's no odds. I figure you wouldn't think this coffee is ghost brew, Winters. Light and have a swaller."



Deputy Marshal Lee Winters

WINTERS considered that invitation suspiciously. Those old mountain trappers had reputations for craft as well as gun-slinging. Winters eyed this one a long time before he yielded to demands of wilderness hospitality. He swung down. "Can't ordinarily refuse coffee; I reckon it wouldn't be exactly polite to refuse this time."

As if by slight-of-hand, Lost Robert produced two tin cups. "Always carry an extra," he explained upon seeing Winters' astonished look. "Feller never knows when he'll have company." He filled a cup and passed it up to Winters.

It was hot; its fragrance enchanting. Winters blew on it, was fascinated when its surface quivered and tiny liquid circles

gave out vaguely whispered sounds. He blew again, and vapors whirled upward, curled themselves into figures of shifting grace and symmetry. Winters thought he heard music. Then, shrugging off increasing enchantment, he glanced down, a sudden cold dread in his veins.

But Lost Robert had poured for himself and was sipping contentedly. He cast a hurt glance at his guest. "Don't you like it, Winters?"

Embarrassed by that veiled accusation of ingratitude, Winters drank. "Right tasty," he said, moved to unnatural enthusiasm. In fact, he liked it so well that he drained his cup. Stimulation raced in his blood, gave him strength and lightness of spirit.

"Sit down, Winters," Lost Robert urged, queer rings of satisfaction and triumph in his words. "Plenty of grub here for both of us. I was expecting company; premonition, I reckon you'd call it."

Winters still held a measure of subconscious caution. He cast about to make sure Lost Robert had no gun within reach. He sat down then. "Am right hungry," he said gratefully. Within seconds he chewed delicious cornbread and tender roast, washed them down from a refilled cup. Rapidly he became a friendly soul; a long-lost neighborly feeling was recreated within him. "Never tasted coffee like this before," he declared cordially. "You must know some magic, Hunter."

Lost Robert tossed twinkling glances at Winters. "Magic? Well, no. I reckon it's just that we all put on our best when expecting company." When bread, roast and coffee had disappeared, Lost Robert took on a worried expression. In unexplained haste, he collected his few belongings. "Sorry to rush you off, Winters, but I've got to push along. Just stopped here for old-time's sake."

Winters got up, grateful for rest and food. "I thank-ee for invitin' me to share with you. Do as much for you sometime."

With amazing quickness and efficiency, Lost Robert finished his work, slung his pack upon his small shoulders and started off. "Good luck, Winters. Remember old Bob Hunter to any of his friends you see."

WINTERS swung aboard Cannon Ball. In doing so, he lost sight of his departing host. Seconds later, he turned in his rocking saddle and looked back.

Lost Robert had disappeared. Where he had been, a fire still burned. Suddenly that fire was caught by wind into leaping flames. From surrounding darkness, Indians emerged into its light, naked, painted savages who circled, danced, contorted themselves, and yelled. Echoes, flung back from mountain walls, produced an illusion of limitless ghosts.

Winters again tightened his hat. It was no wonder, he thought, that Lost Robert had been in such hurry to depart. Cannon Ball moved on gingerly, his body trembling anew. Winters thought of turning back, for subtle warning crept into his consciousness, but Lost Robert's campfire and howling Indians had become a barrier against retreat. He pressed on, and Cannon Ball, hours before balky and mean, moved with a steadfastness and obedience not at all characteristic of him in weird surroundings.

Theirs was a winding trail, hemmed by ponderous cliffs and jagged patterns of sky and stars. Disquietude in Winters' blood merged into loneliness. Never before had his nocturnal journeyings carried him into such overpowering immensity and solitude. Now that Indians and campfire were far behind, oppressive stillness hovered with a closeness that a man could almost touch.

Out of that stillness came a voice, unfamiliar, startling and clear. "Howdy, there, Winters." A man came riding toward him from a dark cove. "If you don't mind, Winters, we shall ride together."

Cannon Ball had quivered and slowed to a walk. Winters' hand did not snap to his sixgun, for there'd been such disarming friendliness in that unexpected voice that he felt no alarm, but only an enlivened dread.

"Howdy, stranger," he said in a voice that sounded unlike his own.

"No stranger, Winters. I'm quite an old stick in these parts. You ought to know Colyer Gunstock. Collie Gunstock, to my close friends."

A man of excellent proportions, superbly mounted, drew alongside Cannon Ball.

"Gunstock?" said Winters, darkly puzzled.

"Of course," said his companion. "I'm quite a legend in your country. Colyer Gunstock, English hunter. Any man who chased buffalo on your Western plains could tell you much about me."

Winters made a quarter-turn in his saddle. "Colyer Gunstock? No, no. You can't be Gunstock; he was tramped to rags long since by stampeding buffalo."

Gunstock nodded. "In a manner of speaking, yes. But we shall not haggle over technicalities. You've chosen an excellent time to be passing this way, Winters. This is carnival night."

"Carnival night?"

"That's what I said."

WINTERS knew about carnivals. He'd seen them when he was a button on Trinity River, down in Texas. Tents, shows, monkeys, rope-walkers, gyp-joints, lemonade, fancy clothes, freaks, monstrosities. But a carnival here?

Not in these desolate mountains!

Another thing puzzled Winters. Lost Robert and Collie Gunstock had called him by name, though he'd never before seen either of them. He sleeved his face. He pinched himself to make certain his body still reacted as live, human flesh.

Gunstock was a talkative fellow. He entertained Winters with accounts of buffalo hunts in Dakota and Kansas, riding to hounds in England, lion-shooting in Africa, skirmishes with savages in various jungles.

They came to a fork in their trail, one that led north, one west. Winters held back, hoping Gunstock would make a choice and ride on. But Gunstock held back, too. He waited for Winters to choose, and when Winters, frustrated and sweaty, headed west, Gunstock drifted easily along at his side.

Almost immediately a voice rang clear from atop a great cliff and clanged away into infinity.

"Tallyho-o!" Echoes or answering voices carried on so distantly that stars themselves seemed to be crying "tallyho-o".

"What in thunderation!" exclaimed Winters.

Gunstock's response was joyous. "Why, this is Tallyho Canyon, Winters; I thought you knew."

Echoes had hardly died, when new sounds moved like mysterious winds, ceaseless, exciting.

Winters was besieged suddenly by forces of distress and terrifying anticipation. "What's that?"

"What's what, Winters?"

"Those noises?"

"I thought you knew," said Gunstock. "Those are carnivals folks. And we'd better move along, or we shall miss something."

Winters would have held back, but fate

became his master. Cannon Ball sprang into a run. A race was on between him and Gunstock's horse. Wind whisperings swelled into an overhead tempest. Gunstock rode faster and faster, but Cannon Ball swept heaving and snorting at his side.

At length Gunstock slowed and exclaimed in disappointment, "As I feared! We have missed a great deal." He glanced at Winters, not to accuse, but to apologize for their inexplicable tardiness. "But, come, Winters; we shall still see much."

Gunstock was off again, though at a more temperate rate. Winters rode spellbound, awed by those tempestuous, rumbling, ubiquitous sounds. On their left, in a glow that seemed to emanate from canyon walls, moved a hurrying procession, elements of silence within it in curious contradiction to an infinity of sounds.

"Can't believe it," rasped Winters. "Collie Gunstock, what trickery is this?"

"Come, Winters; we're not so late as I thought."

Gunstock urged his horse to renewed speed. Winters would have held back, but Cannon Ball, self-willed again, lunged forward at a furious pace. Both horses jolted to a stop at last on a hard promontory where Tallyho Canyon widened abruptly into a vast, desolate waste which Winters at once recognized as Alkali Flat.

"Fast horse you've got there, Winters," Gunstock observed with a true horseman's pride. "Almost as fast as mine."

"Almost?" said Winters.

"Never mind; we'll argue that later," said Gunstock. "Put your mind on what is passing in that parade."

Winters looked. Off to their left-front a procession was pouring onto Alkali Flat. Human beings, yes. Animals, yes. In his

excitement, Winters for a while forgot his fears. He wanted to know what was this, what was that. Some things he recognized. Elephants, of course. Horses. Monkeys.

"But what funny looking people!" he exclaimed.

"Not so funny," said Gunstock. "This is no ordinary carnival, where people come to gawk, drink lemonade and get themselves fleeced. This is an exhibition of thought and wish and retribution, all mixed in a kind of give-and-take pattern."

Winters comprehended nothing. "Explain yourself, Gunnie."

"It's like this, Winters. This is where men of nobler character who wanted things but could not have them, now have their wants satisfied. It is also where mankind's composite wish for eternal retribution is being fulfilled as to characters of less nobility. You will see what I mean."

An imposing sight had caught Winters' attention. "What a lot of elephants! And what fierce groups of men on their backs!"

"Those are for Hannibal," said Gunstock.

"Hannibal, Missouri?"

"No, Winters. This Hannibal was a general. Of ancient Carthage."

"Oh," said Winters. He remembered now. As a button, he'd read about Hannibal and his war elephants, and how Hannibal had wanted more and more elephants. Winters had felt sorry for him because he could not get as many elephants as he wanted. "But I thought Hannibal had been dead for ages."

A frown struck Gunstock's distinguished countenance. "We agreed not to be technical, Winters."

"Yeah," said Winters. "We did, didn't we?"

Without thinking it extraordinary, Winters realized he could, and for some time had been able to see Gunstock quite

distinctly. And now, a hazy light made all things visible.

GUNSTOCK'S frown dissipated. "About those elephants, Winters. Hannibal could never get enough of them. He was forever calling upon Carthage for more and more elephants. Well, he is getting them at last. And each with its component of soldiers."

Winters could see that. There was no end to them. Huge elephants, howdahs on their backs filled with swarthy, spear-bearing warriors, poured in endless file out of Tallyho Canyon and stretched into Alkali Flat as far as he could see. They moved in step, rocking and swinging along in tremendous silence.

Passing closer by Winters and Gunstock were horses with chattering monkeys upon their backs.

"Those," explained Gunstock, "are human beings who have been changed into monkeys. They were annoying chatterers in their former state. Now they chatter from compulsion; I imagine they are very tired."

Winters backhanded his mustache. He was glad he had never been a chatterer. Yet he wondered if some fate even more disagreeable awaited him. He sleeved his face and noted that his sleeve was wet.

Gunstock had his attention again. "Those funnies you see there, Winters; what would be your guess as to them?"

Winters stared. Passing were men who walked backwards. From their foreheads where eyes should have been, two horns extended, each two feet in length. They curved backward toward their owner's faces. Their tips were equipped with eyes.

"I'd never figure that," said Winters.

"Self-centered men," said Gunstock. "Their eyes are fixed that way so they can always look at themselves. It results, however, in their having to walk

backwards." He pointed with a thumb. "Farther over you can see another sort of vanity expressing itself."

Winters saw a procession of men who looked like walking balloons. "They've busted out of their clothes," said Winters.

Gunstock nodded. "You have heard of men who were full of themselves, haven't you?"

"Certainly have," said Winters.

"There is a feeling, more or less universal I'd say, with respect to such men. You'll see that wish expressing itself presently."

Suddenly, far out on Alkali Flat, there was a loud explosion.

"What was that?" asked Winters.

"One of those fellows," said Gunstock, indicating a line of walking balloons. "One has just blown up."

There was another terrific detonation. Gunstock looked at Winters and nodded.

Winters understood. "But look at that one!"

A balloon had commenced to dance and bounce. "He's so full of himself by now," said Gunstock, "he's bound to blow."

Winters watched him. His discomfort was so intense that Winters could feel it himself. An explosion occurred then that made stars and mountains quiver. Nothing remained of him; not one small fragment. Winters was amazed. "What became of him, Gunnie?"

"He just blew up," said Gunstock. "There was no substance to him anyhow. Not really."

Winters meditated through anxious moments. He wondered what his own outstanding vanity could be, what frightful retribution it would bring upon him.

But other characters were streaming by—men with heads of stone (*hard-heads*, Gunstock explained); men tied behind wagonloads of young people, pulling back

furiously, their heels plowing furrows (*old fogies*, said Gunstock); men with fungus and ferns growing on their bodies (*moss-backs*, said Gunstock); men with long ears and horns (*bull-heads*). . .

Winters' attention was caught by a procession of wagons over near Hannibal's elephants. They were loaded with shoes, piled so high that four horses were required for each wagon. "Be-confound!" exclaimed Winters. "Did you ever see so many shoes?"

"They're for George Washington's soldiers," said Gunstock. "Ever hear of George?"

"Sure," said Winters indignantly. "Father of his country."

"Remember Valley Forge?" Gunstock continued, smiling at Winters' patriotic exhibition. "And barefoot soldiers? Blood-stained snow? George wanted shoes for his suffering soldiers. Well, they will never be without shoes again."

Winters blinked. There were almost as many wagonloads of shoes as there were elephants. "Washington must've wanted shoes pretty bad."

Gunstock agreed. "Must have."

Then what had been a mere trickle of oddities became a torrent as Tallyho Canyon disgorged its goods. A horseman in gold and crimson garments rode by followed by a mounted host.

"Sir Robin Stirrup," said Gunstock. "Grand equerry to King Carnevale."

Winters was no longer afraid. He was thrilled. A beautiful woman excepted, in his opinion there was nothing that excelled a fine horse. Here were fine horses in tens of thousands.

Trumpets blew, and following Sir Robin's riders emerged teams of cream-colored horses, one team behind another pulling in tandem, all embellished with shining harness and tassels. Winters expected to see a grand coach, drawn by

seven or eight teams, but he was mistaken. They came on—and on. There must have been two thousand of them. They stretched away for miles. But at last a coach did appear, its coachman visible first, riding high indeed, but with a hat that went up out of sight. Down below, riding alone, sat King Carnevale, on his royal face a smile broad enough to encompass all humanity.

“Well!” exclaimed Winters. “He smiled at me.”

“I hope you remembered to smile back.”

“I think—yes, I’m sure I did.”

“Then you’ll be welcome at his carnival. Let’s go.”

WINTERS and Gunstock rode down from their promontory and were swept along in a tidal wave of joyhunters. Great swings were going up for high altitude acrobats; ropes for tightrope walkers; trapezes so far up they seemed suspended from stars; circus rings enclosed by transparent canvas; race courses; chopping blocks; candy booths; lemonade fountains, and—most incomprehensible of all—long ponds of muck and slime and close-by herds of starving reindeer.

Winters rode close to Gunstock, fearful of getting lost. “Looks like a forty-ring circus, Gunnie.”

“Forty!” scoffed Gunstock. “More likely forty thousand.”

Just then they were jarred by a tremendous explosion. Gunstock arched his eyebrows at Winters and winked.

Exhibitions, Winters figured, had already started.

He saw an inconsequential fraction of what was occurring, for King Carnevale’s royal stand was miles farther on. But he did see a chopping block in performance of its ancient function. Hard-heads were lined up, possibly for a mile, and one by

one were having their heads chopped off to be used for grindstones. Old fogies, fastened by long ropes behind wagons, were being pulled through slime ponds. Moss-backs were laid out on snowbanks and reindeer were grazing off their fungus. Explosions that multiplied in frequency and intensity suggested what was taking place five or six miles away.

Round a large race course, men with those horny eyes were running backwards, pursued by herds of wild horses. They lacked nothing of speed, but occasionally one stumbled backward and was tramped into nothingness. In a mile-square enclosure, bull-heads were arranging themselves in two opposing lines. At a signal they moved toward each other like projectiles. Impacts were attended by sounds of crunching bones and breaking horns as heads met in terrific crashes. Survivors took position again, and again as they went at each other. Winters looked for those called mule-heads. They were nowhere around, but eastward, swinging on across Alkali Flat, were elephants and more elephants. Also, there were those never-ending wagonloads of shoes. Winters caught glimpses of war chariots, too, and of fierce horsemen.

But then it was all over as swiftly as it had begun. Trumpets blared, drums rolled, swings, trapezes, ropes fell to earth; wagons, riders, performers, spectators flowed southwestward as a receding tide. Even Hannibal’s elephants and George Washington’s wagons of shoes were soon obscured by haze.

Winters and Gunstock remained, and after a while Winters discovered that four other men had stayed behind. Those four, dismounted, came forward. One of them carried a cage on his back.

Gunstock swung off his horse. “Get down, Winters, and meet my friends.”

Winters responded, though with

misgiving. "Glad to meet any friends of yours, Gunstock."

They had queer names, those fellows. Spartacus Jones. Horatius Turn. Persistent Maudie. He with a cage on his back—Phelinus Purr.

They all nodded coolly at Winters.

Winters in consequence felt cold and sweaty.

"We've heard of you, Winters," said one of them.

"Mighty sorry," said Winters, "but you're all strangers to me."

"That's of no consequence to us at all," said Spartacus Jones curtly. "We hear you're fast with a gun."

Winters disliked braggarts. "Not at all," he said. "Just lucky, maybe." He observed that three of them had fancy shooting irons in side holsters.

Spartacus, a straight young fellow, came back relentlessly, "Not how we heard it, Winters. You're said to be as quick as a cat."

"Yeah, cat-quick," sneered redheaded Horatius Turn.

Persistent Maudie was small, wiry, chilly, and badly disfigured. "You're too modest, Winters. Cat-quick Lee Winters, you're called."

Colyer Gunstock stepped close to Winters. "What they want, Winters, is to see you prove it."

Winters shuddered. There was menace in their eyes. "No," he said. "I'm no gun-hand; they've got it all wrong."

Gunstock's voice dropped low. "They don't want to have a shoot-out with you, Winters, though it might come to that."

"I heard what was said there," said Persistent Maudie. "But Gunstock is right. What we have is a cat."

"Yeah," said Spartacus Jones, "a cat."

"He's a trained cat," said Horatius Turn.

Phelinus Purr unslung his cage and set

it down. He turned its screened side toward Winters. "There he is, Winters."

Purr's cage imprisoned a large cat. Winters could not tell whether it was black with white stripes, or white with black stripes. But its black was as black as midnight, and its white was as white as snow. It looked at Winters, bared its teeth, growled and spat.

"His name is Socrates," said Jones.

"He has eight lives," said Horatius Turn.

"Huh!" scoffed Winters. "A cat is supposed to have nine lives."

"Socrates lost one," Phelinus explained. He glanced at Persistent Maudie, who squared his shoulders with pride.

Winters felt a rise of impatience. "I don't see what a cat has got to do with it."

"We'll explain that," said Phelinus Purr. "This cat is trained. I feed him essence of catnip. But if he disobeys my orders, he goes without food for a week. Now," said Phelinus as he unfastened his cage door, "I'll explain our game."

HE STARTED off. Socrates leaped out of his prison, growled and spat at Winters, then followed Phelinus. Sixty feet away they stopped and at a command, Socrates crouched, facing Winters. Phelinus backed thirty or forty feet to one side.

"This is how we test your speed, Winters," Phelinus continued. "When I give a command to start, you draw and shoot at Socrates. Meanwhile, Socrates will be charging toward you. After I've given a starting signal, I shall instantly give a stop signal, so that if you miss him, Socrates will not harm you."

"Looks like you're giving me an unfair advantage," said Winters; "I wouldn't like that."

Gunstock stepped up and whispered.

"Don't argue, Winters. Your life depends upon your doing exactly what they tell you to. And don't get a notion you could out-gun them."

"You'll find this to be fair," Phelinus explained after an unpleasant scowl. "It's true this cat is uncommonly slow. You should see some of my fastest ones. But Socrates—well, he's a wampus. Mean, slow, lazy, shiftless. But even as a wampus cat, he is some faster than ordinary cats." He paused. "Willing to take a try, Winters?"

Winters glanced at Gunstock, who nodded vigorously. He glanced at Socrates. At a start of sixty feet, Winters thought he could make sausage of anything that ever moved. Socrates was crouched. His tail waved; his teeth were bared. Winters could hear his angry growl.

Winters stalled. "Must be a mighty cantankerous cat."

"Winters!" snapped Gunstock, warning in his voice.

"He's bad-tempered, 'tis true," said Phelinus.

"He's been shot at a heap," said Persistent Maudie. "He especially doesn't like me."

Winters glanced round. Gunstock's friends were waiting coldly. Winters moved his right hand back and forth across his sixgun. He got his bearings. "I'll take a go at him."

"Then are you ready?" asked Phelinus.

Winters took a good breath. "Ready."

Phelinus gave a small clucking sound, and Socrates stilled, tensed, his eyes blazing like fire.

Phelinus yelled, "Go! Stop!"

Winters' hand swept to his gun, but froze on its handle.

Socrates had leaped sideways, forward, sideways again, and once more forward. Before Winters could draw, Socrates had landed on his right shoulder.

He perched there, growling and spitting, his teeth an inch from Winters' neck.

"Down, Socrates," Phelinus yelled.

Socrates snarled fiercely, angry at having his fury stayed. Slowly he backed, screamed and leaped down. Winters looked round at Gunstock and his friends. He was almost too ashamed and beat to look at their faces.

"That's all right, Winters," said Spartacus Jones. "We didn't expect anything better. As for me, I gave up long ago."

"So did I," said Horatius Turn. "Persistent Maudie, however, still thinks he's fast, and won't quit."

"You underestimated him, Winters," said Maudie. "That fault has been fatal to many fast gunslingers here and yon. Suppose you let me take a try. I got him once; perhaps it will help you to watch me."

"Sure would like to see you try him," said Winters.

"Socrates!" yelled Phelinus. "Get set."

Socrates, snarling viciously, took his position. His hatred of Persistent Maudie was something a man could almost taste.

Persistent Maudie stood, his right foot a few inches forward, both hands in readiness. "Phelinus, you come this way, a few steps, so me and Sock will hear you, one as quick as another. You fudged on Winters, because your voice got to Socrates first."

Phelinus, displeased, moved up. His voice clucked. He yelled, "Go! Stop!"

Maudie drew, fanned his gun hammer, and five bullets kicked dust, one where Socrates had crouched, two where he made his first side landing, two where he made his first forward contact with earth. A sixth sped harmlessly toward outer space. Socrates perched on Maudie's right shoulder, unharmed. His landings had been between bullets. He had hit Persistent

Maudie's shoulder with a jar. He clung there growling, his teeth sunk into Maudie's right ear. Winters could not tell whether Socrates had fudged or not. When Phelinus said "go", Socrates had moved faster than thought. Maybe he had stopped when told to stop. Again, maybe he hadn't.

"Down!" yelled Phelinus.

Socrates let go and sprang down.

Persistent Maudie wore an expression of fierce wrath. "Your cat fudged, Phelinus Purr. He didn't stop when you said stop."

Seeds of strife were about to be sown. Spartacus Jones stepped forward. "Let Winters try his luck again."

"It's no use," said Winters.

"Winters!" Gunstock hurried up and whispered to Winters. "Better try it, Winters. I warned you."

"All right," said Winters, becoming angry.

On his second try he drew, had his gun up, his finger and thumb in position. But Socrates was too speedy. He perched on Winters' shoulder, as before, snarling and spitting.

"Down!" yelled Phelinus.

Socrates backed more reluctantly than before. In leaping off, he viciously, treacherously swiped Winters' right cheek with his left paw. Slightly protruding claws left bloody streaks.

Winters was furious. He looked round, gave his watchers a defiant challenge. "Want me to try it again?"

Hostility leaped to their eyes. "Sure," said they all.

"Get set!" yelled Phelinus.

Gunstock hurriedly whispered to Winters. "You made a mistake there, Winters. If you don't show speed this time, they'll use you for target practice next."

Winters faced his target, tensed. "Let

him come!"

PHELINUS had fudged. He was much closer to Socrates than to Winters. But Winters did not protest. He had been a gun-fanner in his better days. He'd show these insolent fellows a thing or two.

Phelinus clucked and instantly afterwards cried, "Go-stop!"

Winters had observed one thing in particular. Socrates had come forward as something that followed a fixed groove. On his final leap there was an instant when he was in mid-air on a line with a hip-level gun, a gun slightly elevated.

Socrates leaped to one side, forward, to one side again, then for his final landing. Winters' first bullet caught him, sent him spinning back and up. He was an easy target as he spun, and five more bullets pelted into him.

"Stop!" Phelinus screamed.

Winters kicked out his spent shells, deliberately reloaded. A terrible silence had settled round him.

Gunstock whispered, "Don't say anything. You've scared them stiff, but they're murderous now. Socrates has only two lives left, and that will drive Phelinus to near insanity."

Winters kept his gun ready.

Persistent Maudie said icily, "Good shooting, Winters."

Gunstock shrugged. "Well, men, it's time to go."

Spartacus Jones brought four horses. Phelinus put Socrates in his cage. Socrates backed into a far corner and glared at Winters. Gunstock and his friends mounted, and Gunstock lifted a hand in parting salute.

"Goodby, Winters, and good luck," Gunstock said.

"Till we meet again," said Maudie, menace in word and look.

Other words drifted back, but they

came vaguely, distantly. In no time at all, so it seemed to Winters, they had disappeared into Alkali Flat's silence and starlit gloom.

Winters stood alone, squeezed his aching forehead, palmed his eyes. After an indeterminate time, he became aware of Cannon Ban close by, head alert, reins down. Winters blinked several times and swung aboard. Alkali Flat, deserted and lonely, stretched away in its primeval desolation and terrifying ghostliness.

IN FORLORN GAP, Doc Bogannon had put back his last glass and reached to pun down his bar lamp. His batwings swung in slowly.

"Winters!"

Bogie let go of his lamp. His eyes grew wide. Winters had not come forward with his usual confident stride. Instead, he stood just inside and stared round, as if this might have been a strange place to him.

"Winters, what's wrong? You're in Doc Bogannon's place. I'm Doc, Winters."

"Yes, I know," said Winters. He moved slowly to a chair, sat down. "Just wanted to make sure of it, Doc."

Winters rubbed his hands along table edges, over chairs. He tapped lightly with a boot-toe and listened for sound. Gradually surroundings assumed acceptable shape and color.

Bogannon brought glasses and wine. He sat opposite Winters and stared in perplexity. Bogie's huge, handsome strength merely emphasized his expression of bewilderment and futility. "Winters, have you gone cuckoo?"

Winters rubbed his eyes. "I think so, Doc. But you might pour me a drink. If

wine still tastes like wine, there's hope, I'd say."

Bogie filled two glasses. He swallowed copiously, put down his glass. "Winters, I've seen you act a bit odd before, but never like this. Are you hurt?"

Winters breathed deeply, exhaled with a long sigh. He drank, looked at his hands, stared round for things to identify. Wine stimulated him quickly. Familiarity resumed its pleasant role. "Doc, I've had a long ride, and I'm feeling somewhat beat, that's all."

"You look as if you'd seen a ghost," said Bogie.

Winters shook his head. "No, Doc, I ain't seen no ghost. That's something I don't believe in."

Bogie finished his drink. He stared at Winters, stared as if he were seeing a ghost in Winters. "That blood on your face, Winters? Those scratches?"

Winters put a hand to his right cheek. His fingers came away bloody. He drew a quick breath. He stared at Bogie, whose face wore a distant, ashen look. Winters' dry, cold smile spread slowly into lines of amusement. He chuckled softly. "Doc, want to know what brought that blood? Well, I'll tell you. I was scratched by a wampus cat."

Bogie sat back, Winters' attempt at humor unappreciated. "All right," he said, mildly sympathetic and somewhat peeved. "That explains it, Winters. That explains everything."

Winters was beginning to feel about normal. He held his glass for a refill. "That's right, Doc. That explains it. If ever you get mixed up with one of them critters, you'll know exactly what I mean."

