

# **A Desert Hippocrates**

**by Lon Williams, 1890-1978**

**Published: 1953**  
in »Real Western«



Deputy Marshal Lee Winters, gunfight-weary and homeward bound from Rocky Point an hour before midnight, pulled his horse to an uneasy halt on Alkali Flat. Out of starlit gloom and loneliness had come a weird, far cry. In that eery solitude, it smote upon his fancy as a voice from another world, outside of time.

“Oooooo-rand!” it called. In pitch and plaintiveness, it was feminine; because it evoked no answer, it was heart-rending and forlorn. Yet it persisted—seeming near, then far, as night winds lifted and fell. “Oooooo-rand! Oh, Oooooo-reeeeee!” Northward a couple of miles, lights of Forlorn Gap shone dimly through intervening alkali dust. They were lights of home, a tired wayfarer’s dream come true. But far away across Alkali Flat, a woman’s voice called from immeasurable tenderness and love for someone lost. Here, then, was a tug-of-war between instincts of chivalry and a longing to be safe at home. In Winters’ sentimental bosom, chivalry was a mighty force—in any other than extraordinary circumstances dominant over self-interest, over danger, fear and mystery.

But on Alkali Flat at night, experience had taught him that nothing was ordinary. This desert waste, supposedly, was a place where nothing lived, or could live for long. Yet at night it teemed with life, as if darkness had resurrected its dead; concededly honest men claimed to have seen Indians silently playing games there by moonlight, and herds of buffalo that grazed upon vast green pastures. Wolves howled there, too, though not a wolf track could be found by day. Indeed, by day it was a shimmering white desert, as bare as a floor in a vacant house.

At night it was an abode of owls, of dead things that walked, of voices as disembodied and insubstantial as their spirit origins.

This was night. When sweat popped on his face, and his skin began to sting, Winters knew he was scared stiff. Sweat was pouring, and his skin was stinging now. His big rangy horse, Cannon Ball, too, exhibited much of his master's demoralization and fear. Like his master, Cannon Ball wanted no truck with Alkali Flat and its nocturnal creatures, real or spectral. Accordingly, when a spur raked his flank, he lifted his hoofs and set them down hard.

In Forlorn Gap's only saloon, Doc Bogannon, its owner, began to tidy up for closing. As usual, this had been a profitable and interesting evening, an assortment of questionable strange characters contributing to both results.

Because it was a town where busy stage-roads met, Forlorn Gap had for months seen its unfailing quota of strangers. In service to boom-towns north and west, stagecoaches ran day and night—which meant good hunting for road-agents, scoundrels too unimaginative to envisage the inevitable hangropes that awaited them.

There were other types of evil men, too, Bogannon reflected while he put a shine on his bar. He had in mind a gentry more subtle and sinister in their composition and behavior (consequently more dangerous) than those blood-and-thunder badmen who robbed stages and murdered foolhardy adventurers. These were able characters, brilliant in dark inexplicable ways, living in a shadowland of intellect and motive, sometimes consummating evil deeds by devious means, sometimes striking with such simplicity that even a most cautious person could be caught unawares. From where they came, Doc Bogannon did not know. It was if they were spawned in this semi ghost-town of Forlorn Gap, born to spill its blood and to have their own blood spilled into its desert sands.

Bogie laid aside his swabber, selected a clean cloth and gave the glasses their final polish. Then he observed a stranger who had just entered through his swinging doors. Here was a character, thought Doc instantly. He was straight and handsome, swarthy of complexion, smooth of face, his mass of wavy dark hair hanging low on his neck beneath a small black felt hat.

He came up, placed his long-fingered hands on Doc's shiny bar. "Howdy," he said, an air about him shading between insult and insanity.

"Howdy," said Doc, inwardly amused.

Doc Bogannon was a tall, broad-shouldered individual with dark hair parted loosely upon a fine head. Physically he was a gentleman fit to walk with kings. He was a man of great mind, too, a philosopher in both intelligence and disposition, understanding men, good and bad, and finding them equally

interesting. Despite his obvious fitness for greater things, Bogannon was, for reasons best known to himself, contented as owner and operator of a gold-town saloon—and happy as companion of a good-looking Shoshone half-breed wife.

This man who stared out of queer, far-looking brown eyes would have irritated a less charitable person than Doc; patently he regarded himself as a superior being. “I am Spurlock Mosely,” he announced importantly.

“I am Doc Bogannon,” said Doc, as matter-of-fact as Mosely was pompous.

Spurlock Mosely nodded with condescension. “Now that we are so well acquainted, I presume I may make myself at home in your delectable whiskey palace?”

“A pleasure,” said Doc.

“Thank you.”

Doc smiled, found something to do. Prior to that interruption from Spurlock Mosely, his attention had rested quizzically upon another stranger—a small, unfriendly nonentity who sat alone, had spoken to no one and taken no drink. When he’d looked about at all, he’d done so with incomparable gloom. It was worth a drink, thought Doc, to know what this poor mortal’s trouble was. Few patrons remained; it was a leisure time, approaching midnight.

Doc filled a wine-glass, poured himself a small drink and joined his silent, lonely guest. “Mind?” he asked gently.

“I suppose not.”

“Bogannon is my name.”

“What of it?”

Doc took that one smiling. “Sorry, if I offend.” He proffered his wine. “I brought you a drink. Now, knowing your name would promptly improve our social relations.”

Free wine deserved some measure of gratitude. “I’m Winthrop—Thackery Baine Winthrop. I’m stopping in your town merely because it’s so little worse than what I left.”

Winthrop drank sparingly, found his wine good and drank some more.

“You’re not a Boston Winthrop, by chance?” asked Bogie.

“I should hope not.”

“Ah? What’s wrong with Boston?”

“What’s right with Boston?”

Bogie sipped wine. “Well, sir, you’ve put me in a quandary. But I’d say—for men like you and me—Boston is a fine place to stay away from.”

“So is every other place,” declared Winthrop. “If you leave one place because it’s sorry, it will only be to hit a sorrier one.”

Doc folded his arms. “I’d say you’re right, Winthrop. Fortunately, though, an individual like us will find circumstances fully accommodating to his nature. By that, I mean a fellow can be at no more than half a dozen places at once, but he can stay away from unnumbered thousands of ’em. Think of that blessing and smile, Winthrop.”

“I never smile.”

Bogie got up. “More wine?”

“No.”

Doc washed and dried their glasses. He was taking a peek at his watch when his batwings swung in, and a lean, middle-aged newcomer tramped in.

“Winters!”

Winters strode forward. “Wine, Doc.”

Bogie filled a glass. He also reached under his bar for a vinegar dish and clean face cloth. “Hadn’t seen you in a couple of days, Winters. You’ve come across Alkali Flat, too; your face is wet with sweat, and stinging red from alkali dust. Here, wash up”

Winters downed his drink and swabbed his face with vinegar. “Doc, sometimes I vow that I’ll never again cross Alkali Flat at night. I ought to pay my vows, or quit makin’ ’em.”

“Seen another ghost, eh?”

“You don’t believe in ghosts, and I do,” said Winters. “So we won’t argue.” He took a quick glance around. His mirthless eyes rested upon misery incarnate. “Who’s he, Doc?”

“A new friend of mine. Winthrop, by name—Thackery Baine Winthrop.”

Winters regarded Winthrop uncharitably. “Looks right downhearted.”

“Yes,” said Bogie. “Winthrop is what you might call a man with a gloomy outlook.”

“Fitting description,” Winters said with distaste. He regarded himself as potentially every man’s enemy, was slow to admit otherwise. “When I was a button down on Trinity River, Doc, our neighbor ten miles across Trinity bottoms had such an outlook. Gloomy people were not common in Texas, but this feller was an exception. He’d sit droopily on a log for hours and study how everything was going to dogs and snakes. Face got flabby and long. At forty his dewlaps were so long you could tie ’em in a double-bow knot under his chin. Finally somebody found out what his trouble was; he had a hurtin’.”

Thack Winthrop rose indignantly, came forward and stared at Winters. “Maybe you think you’re humorous; well, you’re not. Truth is I, too, have a hurting. It’s here in my chest. But that isn’t why I’m not jumping up and cracking heels, pretending happiness. There’s nothing to be happy about. As for your cheap wit, I could spit on it.”

Winters laid down an extra coin. “Doc, set ’em up for a brave man. You can tell him, too, that except for a stray bright spot or two, I agree with him. Everything’s hopeless, nothing to live for; we ought to all go off and die. Goodnight, Doc.”

Doc’s manner, after Winters’ departure, was one of gentle reproof. “Winthrop, you’ve hurt my friend’s feelings. Deputy Winters was not trying to be funny. But, here. Winters would be hurt still more if you refused his generosity.” Doc filled a glass with wine. He passed it to Winthrop, who stared at it, finally picked it up and returned to his table and melancholy meditations.

A chair scraped and Doc saw Spurlock Mosely rise and move with impressive dignity to Winthrop’s table. He continued his work, but observed them casually.

Mosely, a wary eye on Bogannon, introduced himself to Winthrop, leaned close and spoke secretively. “I overheard your remarks to that impudent deputy marshal. That took nerve, Winthrop; you know, I like you.” He looked at Thack

Winthrop's gloomy face, particularly his nose, one part of his anatomy which he found attractive. "In confidence, I have something to tell you."

Winthrop sipped wine, regarded Mosely with suspicion. "I don't trust you; why should you trust me?"

"Because," said Mosely, "deep within you, there's nobility. Your face—especially your nose—proclaims it. I noticed that at once; being an authority in human anatomy, I admired it."

"You a doctor?"

Mosely glanced cautiously at Bogannon. "I am more than a doctor, Winthrop. I am a great surgeon, unexcelled anywhere." From a coat pocket he removed a bottle, uncorked it. Onto a pad of cotton he sprinkled a liquid. He pretended to smell, then passed it. "Take a whiff of that cotton. You spoke of pain in your chest. That liquid is a magic fluid which destroys pain."

Winthrop, still distrustful, breathed conservatively. Here was an odor he'd never smelled before, sweet, penetrating fumes, soothing, almost stupefying in its effects. "What is it?"

"Chloroform."

"Never heard of it."

"Not surprising. It's a new thing. I learned of it in England, my native land. I make it—also use it."

"For what?"

"To kill pain." He took back his cotton. "Is not that hurting gone from your chest?"

Winthrop breathed slowly, then deeply; his gloom lessened. "For a wonder, I have no pain—not a bit."

Mosely pocketed his possessions. "Your hurting is over. This small favor I did for you was because I liked you—for standing up to that deputy marshal. But I must be going."

Winthrop sprang up. "Wait! I'd like to buy some of that. Will you—"

"Of course," said Mosely. "Come; I'll overwhelm you with it."

Doc casually noted their departure and looked at his watch. Midnight. Apron exchanged for coat, he began to extinguish lights. Suddenly his nose quivered. *What's that I smell?* Something he'd never smelled before. He puzzled over it until he'd locked up. Then, remembering his amorous Shoshone, he hurried homeward.

Spurlock Mosely and Thackery Baine Winthrop found two horses hitched back of Bogie's saloon. Mosely explained that he had just bought an extra one. Winthrop, however, mounted without questions; they rode away into Alkali Flat.

A mild stupor was upon Winthrop; consequently time passed somewhat as it did in sleep. But his stupor was gone when they stopped in a cliff-walled canyon, miles from their starting point. They dismounted, led their horses into an arched passage and ground-hitched them. A dim light diffused itself from unseen lamps.

"Well, here we are, Winthrop," Mosely announced a few seconds later.

"Where?" asked Winthrop. It was an idle question, for they were in a cavernous room, lighted by brilliant lamps suspended from its ceiling.

“This,” explained Mosely, “is my laboratory, my operating room. I am a great surgeon—or did I mention that? And this—” His thumb indicated something immediately behind Winthrop.

Winthrop turned in alarm. What he faced filled him with revulsion and terror. In stature it was a man, straight and of excellent proportions, dressed in trousers and a robe of expensive quality. That which repelled and sickened was its face. It was a face without a nose. And from an inch above its ears, there was no hair on its head.

“My brother,” said Spurlock Mosely. “His name is Sir Jared Mosely. We are both great surgeons, equally great, I’d say.”

Winthrop swallowed, stared, perspired. “Wh—what happened to him?”

“That,” said Spurlock, “is quite a story. Briefly, it’s this. Misfortune drove us from England. Entrance papers into your country being unobtainable, we smuggled ourselves in through Mexico. Being doctors, we earned as we traveled. My brother operated surgically on a Comanche chief—unsuccessfully, as you may surmise. Comanches in revenge cut off Sir Jared’s nose, lips and ears, and lifted his scalp.”

Winthrop tried vainly to swallow. “B—but—”

“Yes,” said Spurlock. “You are thinking Sir Jared still has his lips and ears. It happens that those anatomical parts are not his own; they were borrowed—borrowed from, let us say, your predecessors. A rather good-looking gold-digger named Orand Hodge donated his lips. Those ears were gifts from a traveling salesman—which, incidentally, this salesman did not particularly need, a glib tongue being his main stock in trade.” Winthrop cast about in horror. This was a nightmare, he told himself. Soon he would awake, wipe away sweat and breathe a grateful sigh. Yet everything was too real to be substance dreams were made of. Where light fell brightest stood a broad table. Beside it were small cabinets filled with shiny instruments—tweezers, knives, needles...

Suddenly he screamed. “I’m getting out of here.”

But as he fled, Sir Jared Mosely stepped into his path, enclosed him in strong arms. Immediately Spurlock stepped forward with rawhide thongs and bound him, hand and foot. Together they laid him down, strapped him tight, and began to cut away his coat and shirt. They removed a derringer and its holster from under his left arm and they tossed them aside.

“Have no fear,” Spurlock bade him. “You will feel no pain.”

“Wh—what are you going to do?”

“We are going to borrow your nose,” Sir Jared said happily. “You see, I haven’t any. It’s rather embarrassing, too, this having no nose. You have a splendid one—fortunately. My brother has been prospecting daily for a good nose, one like my own—that is, what was once my own.”

Winthrop screamed again, then glared. “You mean you’re going to cu-cut off my nose?”

“It amounts to that,” said Spurlock. “My brother will lie on this table beside you. Very close, indeed; so close you will seem to be kissing each other. His nose scar will be trimmed and freshened with a knife. When he awakes he will have your nose, sewed to his face. When you awake—No, that’s right, you won’t awake.”

Spurlock Mosely moved away, washed his hands, lighted small lamps under a rectangular, silvered boiler. He returned with a bottle and a pad of cotton which he laid over Winthrop's nose. Winthrop saw and felt a liquid sprinkling down. He screamed, shook his head, tried to break his bonds, but soon he relaxed—into a sleep too deep for dreams, even.

Deputy Winters stirred from half-sleep and lay wide-eyed, staring at a starry sky. Beside him lay his beautiful wife, Myra, sleeping soundly. She had been left a widow in Forlorn Gap. In marrying her, Winters had come into a neat story-and-half cottage with this upstairs bedroom; a reasonably-good mining claim, on which he set foot occasionally for possessory reasons; and a companionship that daily grew more enchanting. Someday he was going to give up being a deputy marshal and settle down, work his mining claim or, better still, stake out a ranch in some mountain valley and raise cattle and a family.

But as he gazed out of their bedroom window, he had a premonition that this dream of a peaceful life might not come true. Danger was abroad; he sensed it, as he had sensed danger on other occasions and lived to face it. That voice on Alkali Flat had unnerved him—more so than he had thought possible at first. He could still hear it in fancy, calling plaintively, receiving no answer, calling again—and again. *Oooooo-reeeeee!* Like a cry from far, mystic shores of eternity.

Next day he rode to Pangborn Gulch. Three days later he was in Brazerville to deliver a prisoner and collect a reward. A week later he was in Elkhorn Pass, where he came upon a crowd of miners congregated around a man on a store platform, a well-dressed man, straight, dignified, eloquent.

“And here, gentlemen, I have your answer. A bit of this wonder-drug dissolved in water in your palm and sniffed up your nostrils will relieve that tightness and dryness that afflicts so many people in these semi-desert regions. You will instantly feel it tingling upward, into your head, soothing, cleansing, adding to your joy of living, lengthening your days. Come right up and for one dollar take with you one of these small cubes of my great discovery...”

Winters rode close and tossed a silver dollar over intervening heads. “There, you great windbag; toss me one of your pieces of hocus-pocus.”

“Ah, sir! But you err when you call Dr. Spurlock Mosely a windbag. I am a benefactor to mankind; what I have to sell is worth many times what I'm asking. But here, you impudent deputy marshal.” Mosely tossed a cube to Winters, who rose in his stirrups to catch it. “Who will be first to follow officer Winters' sensible example? Ah, there you are! And you— and you—and you—”

Winters pocketed his purchase and rode to Forlorn Gap. Several days passed uneventfully, and then late at night he rode in from a successful but nerve-racking gunfight on Pedigo Road.

Bogie was chatting with his latest new friend when his batwings swung and a wiry, dusty visitor tramped in.

“Winters!” Doc exclaimed joyfully. “Come, join us. We were just getting set for a nightcap.” When Winters had slumped into a chair, Doc introduced his new friend. “Deputy Winters, meet Spurlock Mosely who, I am pleased to have learned, is a famous doctor—world-famous, I should have said.”

Winters used his hands to remove his hat and wipe sweat from his forehead. He never shook hands with Doc's new friends; he didn't like to shake with a man he might later have to shoot. "We've met already, Doc."

"Ah," said Bogie. "I didn't know that." Winters fumbled in his pockets, found an object and flipped it to Bogie. "I bought that off your friend Mosely in Elkhorn Pass. Take a look."

Bogie took off its wrapping of oiled paper and smelled. "Well," he exclaimed good-humoredly, "if you'll pardon my saying so, it looks like soap."

"Yeah," drawled Winters. "Looks like a chip of old Granny Hannah Hibbett's hard lye soap."

Spurlock Mosely spun a silver dollar and snatched his article of sale from Bogannon. "I refuse to be regarded as a cheat. Any time I sell something, I stand behind it; there's your dollar, Winters."

"Now, now, no hard feelings," Bogannon said placatingly. He went for another glass and poured wine all around.

Winters sipped lightly. With a mild shudder he noted that Mosely was staring at his head, particularly its upper half. He turned quickly to Bogie. "Anything of interest happened lately?"

Bogie shook his head, then reversed himself. "Why, yes, I almost forgot. Early this evening Mrs. Hodge stepped into my saloon. An unprecedented thing, having a woman come in, a good looking one at that. 'Has anybody here seen Orand Hodge?' she asked, staring around like a person abstracted. Nobody answered, except that I answered for everybody, including myself. 'What do you mean, Mrs. Hodge?' I asked. She stared at me. 'Why, didn't you know? Orand has disappeared.' Who hasn't, I thought, though I didn't say so."

"As a matter of fact, who has disappeared?" asked Winters icily.

"I imagine people come and go quite regularly," observed Spurlock Mosely. "They do," said Bogie.

Winters glanced about. No one else was present. "What became of that gloomy-faced monkey, Doc? Name was Rat's-vein Crowhop, or something like." Doc reflected. "Oh, you mean Thackery Baine Winthrop. Why, he's been gone ages. Left one evening with you, Mosely, didn't he?"

"Winthrop?" said Mosely. "Yes, I recall that he did. Wanted to buy some of my great medicine. I gave him some—a generous supply. Have heard no more from him."

"Medicine?" said Winters. "Not some more of Hibbett's soap, I hope?"

Mosely had taken out a bottle. After a bit of search he found some cotton, sprinkled onto it a few drops of liquid, pretended to smell. He passed his cotton to Winters. "Nothing deceptive or fraudulent about that, Winters. Take a whiff."

Winters pretended to smell, but didn't. Nevertheless he caught a peculiar, sweet odor. "What is it?"

"Chloroform."

"What's it for?"

"It is used in surgery; makes an operation absolutely painless."

Winters again observed that Mosely stared at his head. "Why do you look at me like that, Mosely?"



"I was merely admiring your beautiful hair. My only brother, Sir Jared Mosely, had hair like that, thick and sort of crinkly." He slid back his chair. "Well, gentlemen, I've had a pleasant evening, but all good things must end. Goodnight." He started out, stopped abruptly and came back. "Who was that you were speaking of a moment ago?"

"Winthrop," said Bogie.

"No, there was another."

"Hodge," said Bogie. "Orand Hodge." Mosely squeezed his chin. "I just happened to remember something. I believe I know where he's hiding. If either of you would care to take a short ride, I'd show you where to find him."

Winters slapped his hat on. Having his beautiful, crinkly hair stared at was getting to be uncomfortable. "I'll ride with you." He got up and tramped out, nodding to Mosely to come along. Mosely, exalted by what Bogie analyzed as a feeling of anticipated conquest, strode grandly after him.

Then it was that Doc Bogannon had a premonition. He recalled that a glib-tongued traveling salesman had departed with Spurlock Mosely. He recalled that Orand Hodge had departed with this same Spurlock Mosely. He recalled, also, that Thackery Baine Winthrop—

He sprang up. "Winters!"

He rushed out and looked in every direction. "Winters!"

But they were gone.

Winters and Mosely rode southwestward across Alkali Flat. Mountains lay in that direction, and canyon walls that closed about them, towered darkly above them. By starlight Mosely and his horse loomed as shadows, more ghostly than substantial, but soft thuds on Alkali Flat had changed to clatter of iron-shod hoofs where canyon rocks replaced desert alkali and sand. Echoes from curving walls broke every sound into fragments, and Winters' nerves jangled with every crackle.

"Well, here we are," said Mosely, halting before an arched cliff-opening. He dismounted. "Here, I am confident, you will find Orand Hodge, or what is left of him."

Winters felt sweat pop out. "What is left of him?"

"Oh," said Mosely casually—much too casually—"after such a long absence from his natural habitat, you would expect some change in him, would you not? Get down, Winters; methinks I see a light back there."

Winters glanced warily about but saw nothing to be scared of. He swung down, held onto Cannon Ball's reins until he noticed that Mosely had ground-hitched, when he let go and followed his escort.

"You seem familiar with this place, Mosely."

"Many places have known my presence—and felt my touch," said Mosely.

*What kind of touch,* Winters wondered? He did not advance with as brisk confidence as marked Mosely's progress, though their way was over a smooth, hard floor, illuminated dimly by light diffused from beyond a bend. He kept both an ear and an eye to rear and a gunhand alert.

"You wouldn't be holding Orand Hodge a prisoner here, would you, Mosely?"

“Prisoner? Far from it. Dark portals, Winters, are not always pathways to prison; sometimes they lead to freedom. A new, strange kind of freedom, perhaps, yet freedom. And here we are again.” They stopped. A brilliantly lighted and oddly furnished cavern opened before them. “My laboratory, Winters. My hospital, my operating room.” He turned, looked intently at Winters and added, “And my patient.”

“Oh, that is quite right,” said a new voice.

Winters had heard or seen no one else. He had been cautious, too; at least he’d thought so. But Spurlock Mosely had seemed so carefree, so incautious, that Winters realized too late how extremely careless he himself had in fact been. Somewhere somebody had stepped behind him and now had a gun in his back.

“My best advice, Winters,” said Mosely, “is that you lift your hands. We do not intend to kill you; that would defeat our purposes, but you could easily force us to immediate desperation.”

“And do take off your hat,” said that new, spooky voice. “I am so anxious to see your lovely hair. No, no, my friend; I shall remove it for you.”

“It is my brother, Sir Jared Mosely, who speaks to you,” said Spurlock Mosely. “Like myself, he is a famous surgeon. Don’t look just yet, because if you make a wrong move—”

Winters did not lift his hands. He felt a jab in his back, heard a sixgun click to full cock. He saw Spurlock’s right hand move gracefully and swiftly to an under-arm holster.

“And your reason for being here,” said Sir Jared, “is your ownership of a lovely head of hair, which of course, you shall give to me. Your predecessors have made their donations. New lips from dear Hodge; new ears from dear Mr. Fuller; a new nose from poor, sorrowful Mr. Winthrop. And now, from you, Mr. Winters—”

Sweat had streamed on his face. But now Winters was angry, his sweat abated. In a pinch like this, he trusted nothing except his sixguns. These lunatics belonged to a profession which had schooled them in other arts than gunplay, even though he realized but little art was required in pulling a trigger—and but a fraction of time.

Sir Jared had not yet removed Winters’ hat. Possibly he had sensed danger and hesitated. Winters waited. If curiosity impelled Sir Jared to remove that hat, Winters would have his chance.

It came, stealthily, cautiously.

“I can wait no longer,” Sir Jared said.

Winters discerned a slight change of pressure against his back, a touch on his hat brim, a tug. In that fraction of a second, there was division of attention, of alertness. Winters whirled, came up blazing. Spurlock Mosely had made a complete turn, and his gun divined Winters’ move; his gun, too, was roaring.

In his saloon, Doc Bogannon waited. Lee Winters had been a fine officer, he reflected grievously. Bogie had seen men come and go. He’d learned to look upon death philosophically—generally as no loss to him—and, if mankind’s dream of immortality had merit, a distinct gain to some unfortunates who had prematurely lost their lives. But Winters—Ah, here was a man whose passing would leave an empty place. In a few short, swift years he had become a mighty

fortress of law and order; without him, Forlorn Gap would long since have become a mere hideout for cutthroats, lunatics and thieves. Wherever he hit, he made a dent; he'd been a man's man, his cold sarcasm notwithstanding, and his deadliness.

Bogie waited an hour. A stagecoach pulled in from Elkhorn Pass, stopped briefly at Goodlett's and went on its way eastward. Bogie swabbed his face, walked around and around until his head swam, reversed direction and walked again. He looked at his watch. Two hours had passed.

His batwings swung inward.

"Winters!"

Winters advanced slowly, a pallor on his face. "Get me a sip of wine, Doc."

Doc hurried. They sat down together. "What happened, Winters?"

Winters drank, thought a moment and shook his head free of some of its haziness. "They meant to take my scalp, Doc, peel it off my head and sew it on Sir Jared's head. I had to kill them." He lifted his vest and pulled his shirttail out, exposing a fresh bandage around his body with a bloody spot above his left hip-bone. "I got it through there, Doc—luckily only a flesh wound—and that Doctor Jared Mosely dressed it—dressed it as he was dying. Cleaned it with an iodine swab, like you'd clean a gun barrel. Wanted to do it. Insisted. Said he wanted his last act on earth to be one of healing. Sort of gets me, Doc."

"What you're saying sort of gets me," said Bogie.

"Sir Jared Mosely, Doc. Brother to that loony who was here. Spurlock died right off, but Sir Jared lived over an hour. Told some creepy things, too, about Comanches, operations, drugs. Wanted me to breathe that chloroform so I wouldn't feel any pain while he fixed me up. I didn't do it, though I almost wished I had there for a while. And do you know something, Doc? After those loonies were dead, I felt I'd set progress back a hundred years. That is, for a while I felt that way. But, riding back across Alkali Flat, I heard that voice again—that woman's voice. That got me all mixed up." Winters squeezed his forehead and shook his head.

Bogie poured more wine. "Drink, Winters. You're not yourself yet."

"Thanks, Doc." Winters drank slowly, then got up, feeling better. "Well, Doc, let's call it a day. Tomorrow there'll be something else."

