

Fountain of Youth

by Lon Williams, 1890-1978

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Deputy Marshal Lee Winters had almost completed what he regarded as a good day; he'd collected bounty on a wanted bozo without having to shoot him. When a man felt as cheerful as Winters did right now, riding home by way of Alkali Flat wasn't a bad prospect.

It was a haunted trail, but there was a bright moon—a natural handicap to ghosts. Lee figured that visibility was good for a quarter-mile, especially as to anything big enough to be dangerous. With that margin, and a fast, rangy horse like Cannon Ball, he could ride off and leave anything behind—except possibly a spook.

But he'd made only five miles when Winters wished he hadn't come this way. At night, Alkali Flat was a weird place. By day, not so much as a horned toad could be seen there; alkali spread white and hot into a vast wasteland. But at night it had voices—wolf howls; keelings of owls, flat, staccato yaps of foxes, and most terrifying of all—mournful cries of humans.

This night, however, the wandering winds bore no voices. Yet that in itself was strange; a hush suggested that something of unusual character was abroad, that creatures which ordinarily made Alkali Flat ghostly with their plaints had stilled in curiosity, or fear. Then Winters saw what might have been an explanation. On his right, too distant for identification, but near enough to be clearly seen, moved a horse and its rider. They moved as if they'd been his own horse-and-rider shadow, no faster, no slower. He heard no hoof beats; their muffled sounds were carried away on a southwest wind. Appearance of another rider, Lee reasoned, should have been no more mysterious than his own presence there; but he was worried nevertheless. To keep a watchful eye, he turned sideways, right foot loose in its stirrups, left hand to saddlehorn.

Though he was scared, he was not so alert as he should have been; he realized that when an unearthly noise broke loose on his left and Cannon Ball leaped as a terrific spring triggered free.

Winters was flung backwards. He hung on by horn and strap, head down, with flying hoofs knocking alkali into his face.

Cannon Ball, scared and mean, clamped teeth to bit and pounded toward Forlorn Gap, accelerating with every leap. Winters clung fast until his horse had settled into maximum speed. He righted himself then and looked back. As far as he could see, Alkali Flat was again an untenanted, wind-swept waste.

Doc Bogannon's saloon had been a busy spot for hours, but most of his customers had departed. A tall, elegant gentleman, lingering mysteriously, stood before him. "A small nip of wine, my good man."

"With pleasure," said Bogannon. He filled a wine glass and picked up a coin. "If I've made your acquaintance, I've forgotten it."

"Friend Bogannon, I am Swan Caplinger. It is a coincidence of travel that I am stopping over in your town. Tomorrow's stage will take me to Pangborn Gulch, to new adventures and new fortunes."

"Interesting," said Bogannon. Bogie himself was tall; he was also broad and solidly built. If appearance had meant anything, he'd have been a statesman—perhaps an ambassador—instead of a barkeep in this crossroads semi-ghost-town of Forlorn Gap.

"Interesting is right," said Swan Caplinger. He was slender, well-dressed in gray suit, bow tie and high-topped gray hat. There was also a superior look in his eye, one that bespoke tremendous self-confidence. "Truth is, Bogannon, I lead a most interesting life."

Bogie leaned back, folded his arms and surveyed his guest with modest curiosity: "Forlorn Gap is a stopover; once it was a teeming gold town. All sorts of men have come and gone. I'm always curious concerning those who boast of interesting lives. Just what is it about your life, Caplinger, that rates it as most interesting?"

Caplinger smiled indulgently. "Gladly I shall divulge my secret. As to who invented sleep, I know not. As to who conquered sleep, I know full well. 'Twas I."

Bogie's eyes spread. "No joking?"

Caplinger leaned toward Bogie and spoke confidentially. "I haven't slept a wink in eight years."

Bogie's incipient reaction did not materialize. His batwings swung and Deputy Lee Winters tramped in, face sweaty and alkali-stung. „A stiff drink, Doc.”

Doc poured whiskey. While Winters swept it down and glanced curiously about, Doc set up a bowl and placed a clean cloth beside it. „Your vinegar, Winters. I see you've come across Alkali Flat; I'd say, also, you've seen a ghost.”

Winters swabbed his stinging face with vinegar. „Doc, sometimes those ghosts scare me stiff; sometimes they make me mad. This time I'm scared and mad, too.”

„Winters, don't you know there's no such thing as a ghost? Men merely see what they look for. I'd say that if you made up your mind to it, you could see an elephant on Alkali Flat. Possibly two elephants. You'd see them, but of course they wouldn't be there; they'd be in your mind.”

Winters arched one eyebrow at Bogie. „You're a most consoling gentleman, Doc. If you'd seen me hanging onto Cannon Ball, like a tail-hooked monkey on a trapeze, I reckon you'd have said that, too, was mental.” Winters had a creepy feeling suddenly. He whirled and found a tall gentleman in gray smiling at him. „Well, stranger, you look amused; perhaps I should buy you a drink.”

„A courtesy of that sort would be gratefully received, Officer Winters.” He beamed joyfully. „I am Swan Caplinger, and I'm delighted to make your acquaintance.”

Winters looked him up and down in a quick glance. He couldn't recall having seen this beanpole on any „wanted” circular. Doc had poured two drinks. Winters passed one to Caplinger. „With my compliments, Cappy.”

Caplinger's mouth corners went up indulgently. „You are every inch a gentleman, Officer Winters. Now, as to me, I have a most unusual interest. I've always said to myself, in some way or other every man is superior. If you will pardon my asking, I should like to know in what way you excel all other men.”

Winters cast a suspicious glance at Bogannon. „Is this meant for a joke?”

Doc shook his head. „Caplinger's got something; you shouldn't miss it.”

Winters eyed his inquisitor with something between disapproval and anger. „Well, sir, there is something at which I once excelled all mankind. Down in Trinity Valley my dad, who'd migrated from Tennessee, had a farm; he raised cow, as well as brats, and every fall he pulled corn-fodder for his stock. In my youth I was a good fodder-puller— best in Texas, therefore best on earth.”

Caplinger, doubting not a word he'd heard, waxed enthusiastic. „Winters, I welcome you into a great brotherhood, that of superior men. It is a privilege to think of oneself as being in some way without a peer. Congratulations!”

Winters glanced toward Bogie's batwings as a big stranger entered and headed for a table. His attention returned to Caplinger. „And now, Cappy, just what have you got to rooster about?”

Caplinger rose to his utmost height. „Officer Winters, it is I who have conquered sleep. This will seem incredible to you, certainly; but I have not slept a wink in eight years, seven months, and twenty-three days.”

Winters was still in a bad mood from his wild ride on Alkali Flat. But here was an unblushing windbag who infuriated him. „Well,” he snapped, „now that I've seen everything there is to see, I reckon I'll go home. Goodnight, Doc.”

Caplinger was not offended. He watched Winters shove out, then turned a pleasant countenance upon Doc. „Truly, it is hard for men to believe in my

extraordinary willpower; hence my feeling toward Officer Winters is nothing but kind.”

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A big stranger had moved forward and paused near Caplinger. He, too, was tall, but much heavier than Caplinger. He was bareheaded, his dark hair thick and wavy. His forehead was broad, and his dark eyes twinkled with a friendliness that could have sprung only from assurance of inner excellence far beyond that of ordinary mortals.

He extended a long-fingered hand. „My friend Caplinger, I overheard you respecting your extraordinary talent, and I believe every word of it; I am Kirk Delozier.”

They clasped hands and bowed, as one genius to another. Caplinger squared his shoulders. „You, of course, have some point of unsurpassed excellence, friend Delozier. You will be doing me a great favor—”

Delozier laid a quarter-eagle on Bogie’s bar. „Bartender, a bottle of wine; also, glasses.” When Bogie had obliged, he took wine and glasses and nodded toward a table. „I have much to tell you, sleepless friend.”

Bogie watched them, wondering what sort of chattering monkeys they were. But they took a distant table, and Delozier kept a wary eye to make sure Bogie did not watch or listen too closely.

Over their wine, he leaned toward Caplinger. „Sleepless friend, you are interested in my specialty; well, I shall disclose it. But first, how old would you take me to be?”

Cappy studied him a moment. „About forty, I’d say; possibly forty-five.”

„Caplinger,” said Delozier, a bit haughtily, „I am three hundred and eighty-seven years old.” Caplinger caught his breath. Not that he doubted, but rather was amazed and delighted. „Most remarkable! I should like to call you brother, for you have, indeed, a rare distinction.”

Delozier took from beneath his coat an oddly-shaped bottle with a pink liquid. Its label read, *Elixir of Life Eternal*. „This, sleepless friend, is my secret. There’s a cave nearby in which flows a supernatural spring; one drop of this magic liquid has converted it into a fountain of eternal youth. Drink of it, and you shall never grow old.”

„Glorious thought!” exclaimed Cappy. „Imagine being eternally young, and never wasting time in sleep! Brother, I would drink of this fountain.”

„Drink of it you shall,” said Delozier. He rose, pocketed his bottle of elixir, and indicated by a nod that Caplinger should follow him.

They went out together, each erect and proud, comrades in an exalted brotherhood. Outside, Delozier stopped and put a strong arm about his new friend’s shoulders. „Sleepless friend, this life of yours, mortal in its nature, is about to become immortal; we shall ride together, and you’ll agree with me there have been few rides like it in all this world.”

„You overwhelm me with blandishment,” said Caplinger, „but luck plays me false already; I have no horse.”

Delozier was stumped for a moment only. „Ah, I shall furnish you a horse. It is one a friend entrusted to my care.”

At Bogie's hitch-rail were two, a light bay and one of ivory.

„This shall be yours,” Delozier said. „A palomino for a special friend; he is a most intelligent animal, too, and to ride him is to drift into dreamland.”

They mounted and rode southward. Soon they were on Alkali Flat, riding easily, their faces caressed by warm, alkaline wind. Two miles from Forlorn Gap Delozier reined to a walk. Caplinger's horse slowed in harmony.

Caplinger cast his face upward. Moonlight twinkled in his eyes. „I feel a presence, such as I've never felt before. It is as if immortality was about to envelop me. What a glorious thing—to be always young!”

„What a glorious thing,” murmured Delozier, „to be always asleep.”

„But I never sleep,” declared Caplinger uneasily.

„You will, however,” said Delozier. „It is not good to go without sleep.”

„No man knows better than I what a good—”

Caplinger's protest went unfinished. From his right a tinkling melody intervened.

Delozier shouted mockingly, „Watch him, Caplinger!”

His evil warning was too late. Cappy's palomino reared suddenly. His rider was spilled backward. Cappy landed with a *whoomp!* and rolled, groaning, onto an elbow. It was then he saw immortality's dread approach. A huge bear, growling, teeth-flashing, rushed toward him.

Cappy struggled to his knees. „Delozier!” Delozier and both horses had proceeded onward a considerable distance and stopped.

„Delozier,” Cappy screamed, „you have betrayed me. You—”

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Deputy Winters had gone home, had supper with his good-looking wife and gone to bed. He was not so tired as he was disturbed and nervous. A warm, alkali-tanging wind blew into his upstairs half-story bedroom; it brought no sounds, such as he'd heard on other nights—eerie cries of desert owls, coyote-calls, wolf-howls—but after a time a faint tinkle of music flitted in.

Winters leaped out of bed, leaned from his window and listened. Instantly a scream came out of Alkali Flat, another, then a final one that rose to a screeching crescendo and abrupt end.

Winters drew himself in and sleeved his face. One thing was certain; he wanted no truck with Alkali Flat.

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Two days later he was in his office when he heard that music again. He stepped out in time to see his horse Cannon Ball rear and try to walk off on his hind feet. Only a sturdy hitch-post and a strong bridle prevented his departure for open spaces.

„Whoa, horse,” Winters shouted. He leaped down and talked Cannon Ball into being less violent, though he could not talk fear and trembling out of him. Cannon Ball stared down Forlorn Gap's dusty street, snorted, and beat with his front hoofs.

No wonder, thought Winters. Coming slowly toward them was a short, thick-necked man in red trousers, red shirt and round, beakless, gold-braided red cap. Suspended by a strap around his neck was a box-like contraption with a crank

that gave out a tinkling torrent. Beside him on a pole leash, and muzzled, ambled a monstrous brown bear. So, thought Winters, *that was what scared my horse's daylight's out and caused him almost to dump me onto Alkali Flat.*

A few citizens appeared and stared at this strange sight. Bear, man and music stopped in mid-street.

Shorty shouted hoarsely, „People like to see bear dance?”

There was no answer.

A big, handsome, bareheaded gent strode up to Winters. „Officer Winters, I believe; I'm Kirk Delozier, presently a guest at Goodlett Hotel.” Winters made no offer to shake hands; he didn't like to shake with a man he might have to shoot before sundown. Moreover, this gent was too conceited for warm appeal to a man of rawhide, bones and gunpowder.

„Any connection with that music maker?” asked Winters.

Delozier's eyes filled with humor. „No, but you've got to admit he has something. To conquer and control a bear like that requires courage. It happens I've seen him before: Trigg Humbolt, as I remember. Saw him recently in Brazerville.”

Winters looked his man over coolly. Delozier was tall and muscular, handsome, friendly and, less to Winters' liking, a mite condescending. „Have I seen you somewhere before?”

Delozier's head, lowered slightly. Smiling eyes looked out at Winters under heavy eyebrows. „It is entirely possible; you see, I've been around a long, long time, one, place and another. But come, my friend; let's see what a trained bear can do.”

Winters patted Cannon Ball's neck reassuringly, gave his gun-belt a hitch and accompanied Delozier.

Spectators kept their distance, but Delozier approached Trigg Humbolt without hesitation. „How much money must you have, my friend?”

„To make bear dance—five dollars.”

„That,” said Delozier, „should be easy.” He drew money from his pocket. „Here's half of it. I shall see how generous these citizens are.” He made a round, collecting coins.

Before Winters, he exhibited a smile of good-fellowship. Winters laid a half-dollar in his palm. Delozier's smile persisted. „That makes it, good people, with some to spare.” He returned to Humbolt. „There, accomplished friend. Now show us what your bear can do.”

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Winters was more interested in Humbolt than in Humbolt's bear. Here was a mean-looking bozo, surly, thick-lipped, pale-eyed. If he wasn't a wanted baboon, it was because he'd covered his tracks and his crimes. Winters knew a killer when he saw one, especially when he was more brute than human. But he had to admit that Humbolt knew his bear.

„Round!” Humbolt yelled in a quick, hard voice. Jerking his leash tight, bruin circled his master, tearing around and around at high speed. He was more than a big bear; he was fat and heavy, certainly a well-fed critter. Dust trailed after his digging paws. „Ho!” his master yelled, and bruin stopped. „Walk!” At that command he rose on his hind feet and circled, walking like a man. „Dance!”

Winters' eyes narrowed; a cold, sweaty anger stirred. Humbolt's bear rocked back and forth on his hind feet in what presumably was a bear dance. Winters was unimpressed. But that which had an effect on him was bruin's evil eye; it was fixed on Winters, savage and persistent.

„Not bad,” said Delozier, smiling benignly at Winters.

„Crummy!” clipped Winters. „You can have all of it.” He turned on his heels and went back to his office.

In passing his horse, he observed more carefully what he had noticed casually many times before. Cannon Ball had three parallel scars on his left hip. *Probably struck by a bear*. Cannon Ball was a fine horse—sometimes mean, ordinarily fearless—but right then he was scared witless.

Winters went into his office. Once more he scrutinized a picture of one Pitser, alias Vic, alias Thrasher Murdock. Wells-Fargo was offering one thousand dollars for him, dead or alive, delivered at Brazerville. Winters knew where he was hiding.

Four days later, a little before midnight, Winters returned from Brazerville and stopped for a taste of wine at Bogannon's. „Anything new, Doc?”

„Nothing new; nothing old,” Bogie replied. „I was just about to close up. Have a seat, and I'll join you in a nightcap.”

„You can count me in, if you'll be so kind,” said Kirk Delozier, entering abruptly and striding confidently toward them.

„Ah!” Bogie exclaimed. „I'm sure Winters will be as delighted as I.”

If Delozier noted any sarcasm in Bogie's voice, he ignored it. He joined them at a table. „Winters, you've been away for a while, haven't you?”

„I have,” said Winters dryly.

„Any luck at Brazerville?” asked Bogie.

Winters patted his middle where he wore a concealed money belt. „If you call a thousand smackers luck, I was lucky.”

„Indeed!” exclaimed Delozier. „A handsome sum.”

„A long, hard ride,” said Bogie. „Make it all today?”

„Right, and worn ragged. Must be gettin' old.” Delozier, twinkling, put down his wine glass. „Old? Winters, you're a mere boy.”

„Rot! I ought to be wearn' long, white whiskers, I'm so old.”

„How old are you, Winters?” Bogie asked. „Thirty-four. Mighty old for a knockabout like me.”

Delozier leaned forward. „Winters, how old would you say I am?”

Winters glanced at Delozier and, oddly, thought of skunks. „I'd say forty or thereabouts.”

Delozier glanced from Winters to Bogannon. He smiled blandly. „Brace yourselves, gentlemen. I'm three hundred and eighty-seven.”

Bogannon strangled and coughed. When he could speak, he said squeakily, „Preposterous!” Winters showed eager surprise. „Remarkable!” Delozier brought from an inside coat pocket a leather packet, from which he meticulously removed and unfolded a worn, faded parchment. „My birth certificate, gentlemen, written, as you see, in old English. The handwriting is that of Richard Kilburn, Abbot of Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England. I was christened Kirkwell Gildershaft Delozier. I was a clergyman under Henry the Eighth, a court clerical under Queen Elizabeth, a member of parliament under Charles the First. Unfortunately, I joined Oliver

Cromwell's crowd, and when Charles the Second became king, I, along with many others, was branded a regicide and had to flee England. I've been a world traveler since, but fortunately I learned a great secret in my boyhood. Possibly I stole it, if technicalities must be observed, for I filched it from a secret cabinet of Richard Kilburn."

Delozier put away his birth certificate and brought forth a bottle of odd and antique shape, filled with a pink liquid and bearing a label, *Elixir of Life Eternal*. „This," he declared, „is that secret. But it has a limitation; it is only an elixir. One drop of it, dissolved in a spring, or pool, makes that to which it is added a fountain of youth. Not every spring or well responds to its transforming magic, however, which explains my having been a world traveler. I live only where responsive springs are to be found. Through an Indian medicine-man I met over a hundred years ago, I learned of such a spring near this spot. I found it, of course; hence, my being here tonight is not pure coincidence."

Winters stared at Delozier's bottle and its magic elixir. He thought of his beautiful wife and how wonderful it would be to be forever young with her. „Delozier, what will you take for some of that stuff?"

„It's not for sale, Winters, but I recognize in you it man we need—a man of courage, toughness and skill in your profession. It is such men as you who stand, and have ever stood, between peaceful society and its enemies. I could be no greater benefactor to mankind than by presenting you with a long and useful life. I cannot give you this, of course, but if you will come with me, I can show you where there is a fountain of youth. That shall be yours as a gift."

Bogannon landed Winters an under-table kick, but Winters paid him no mind. „Winters," Doc persisted, „you're tired; of course you wouldn't think of going on a wild-goose chase tonight." Winters got up as Delozier rose. „Tonight? Of course I'll go. There might never be another night like this."

„But your horse is tired," exclaimed Bogie. „You could at least show *him* a little mercy."

„Of course," said Delozier. „As it happens, a friend of mine is in town and has left a horse in my care. He's hitched outside, beside my own. A splendid one, too. Winters, you shall ride him."

Bogie's further protest was intercepted by an angry frown from Winters. But he did notice, and with satisfaction, that Winters carried two six-guns. Winters was a good officer, but he took chances no sensible man would have taken; he should have known that Kirk Delozier was a maniac.

When they'd been gone twenty seconds, Bogie remembered Swan Caplinger—Sleepless Cappy. What had become of him? Bogie hadn't seen him or heard of him since that night when he'd gone out with Delozier. And they'd been looking at a bottle!

Bogie ran out, intending to call after them, but Winters and Delozier had disappeared. It was time to close up and go home, but Bogie went back inside and sat down.

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On Alkali Flat, Winters and Delozier rode side by side at an easy lope. A setting moon cast long shadows, which moved with them. There was something unusual

about this horse Winters rode. He was a fine palomino, but he was more; some fancier, or showman, had taught him to arch his neck and hold his head gracefully as he loped, and to set his feet down gently. Undoubtedly he was a trained horse, but trained for what?

Winters soon found out. From their right a tinkle of music burst into a sudden cascade of exciting sounds. Winters' horse instantly reared. Winters, not unused to rearing horses, clung on at first, but when his palomino began to jump like a kangaroo, that was too much. Winters landed hard, and stars glittered in his eyes.

Two things he saw, both of which angered him beyond measure. He saw Delozier and both horses move swiftly away; he heard a growl. Then he saw Trigg Humbolt's bear racing toward him, its teeth flashing.

From that moment on, his reactions were entirely physical. Around him swirled chaos and death—a bear, bullets in its brain, thrashing upon him, gun slugs hissing at him from two directions, Kirk Delozier riding at him, a six-gun blazing, and Winters, crouched behind a kicking bear, firing all that was left in two bucking forty-fives, ducking under hoofs of a leaping horse, at last crawling from under a limp, dead body.

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Doc Bogannon heard gunfire, wiped sweat, and waited.

Then his batwings squeaked, and Deputy Winters staggered in. Doc sprang up and rushed to help him. „Winters! You're killed.”

Winters slumped into a chair. „A drink, Doc. I'm not killed, but I'm plenty scared; first time I ever considered being a lawman, somebody ought to kicked me.”

Doc brought whiskey, water and towels. „You're cut up, Winters. Must've tangled with a panther.”

„It was that bear, Doc. I've seen and heard of robbers, but those ex-circus monkeys had a new angle.”

Doc unfastened Winters' torn shirt and began to dress his lacerations. „What happened, Winters?”

„Doc, I don't know what happened. All I know is, there's a couple of dead men and a dead bear down on Alkali Flat, and I'm still alive. But if you want to know what's goin' on around this dang crazy town, you ask somebody who knows. Don't ask me.”

