

# King Solomon's Throne

by Lon Williams, 1890-1978

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Deputy Marshal Lee Winters, headed for home-base in Forlorn Gap, rode by starlight onto Alkali Flat. It was too late now to backtrack, but he wished he'd gone by Elkhorn Pass instead.

Alkali Flat at night was a weird place. Its winds carried noises foreign to its character. Wolves howled there, coyotes barked and yodeled, owls clinked like steel upon musical gongs—and that in a vast, whitish barren where life theoretically could not subsist at all. *Ghosts! That was what they are*, thought Winters. Ghosts of dead animals, dead men, and dead ages.

Mile after mile he let his tired horse walk, his eyes alert for night-prowlers, real or unreal. Then there came a sound that made his flesh crawl. It winged up from southwestward, wind-whipped and eerie. There was no mistaking its nature; somewhere across there, male voices were singing. How many there were, he could not tell. Nor could he determine what song, or songs, they sang. For awhile, driving winds mourned a dirge. It was followed by a paean of victory that flung

itself fiercely around his tingling ears. Transcending strained, high-pitched measures, a discordant cry came shrieking. It was a man's scream, a death scream. It gave Winters' throat a tight feeling; sweat popped in profusion, proof positive that he was scared stiff.

Winters wanted no truck with ghosts. He lifted bridle leather and gighed deep. His horse, also eager to put miles behind, set its hoofs down hard and fast. Forlorn Gap's distant, dim lights grew brighter.

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Lamps in Doc Bogannon's saloon burned clean. Guests from Goodlett Hotel had dropped in, had their drinks, chatted awhile, and departed.

One customer remained, Spicewood Lilloughby, a runty, mouse-faced miser who sat, dry and wretched, torn between thirst for wine and affection for a silver coin clutched in skinny fingers.

Doc Bogannon dried and polished glasses. He was tall, black-haired and heavy, statesman rather than barkeep in appearance and bearing. He possessed philosophical eyes, too, hence regarded his miserly guest not with merited distaste, but as a human creature entitled to his principles.

„Spicewood,” said Bogie, „your luck has run thin tonight; nobody's been generous.”

Lilloughby stiffened. „Sir, I'll have you know I'm no beggar; I've money, and I'll drink when I'm ready.”

Bogannon's batwings swung inward, and lean, middle-aged Deputy Lee Winters strode in, dusty, spirit-drained. „A drink, Doc, and make it stiff.”

Bogie set up a glass and filled it. „Seen another ghost, eh?”

Winters downed his liquor. „You guessed it, Doc; where's that vinegar dish for alkali sufferers?”

Bogie brought up bowl and cloth. „This means you've come across Alkali Flat.”

Winters swabbed his burning face and felt better. „Why I done it, Doc, I wouldn't know; too spooky out there for me.”

Bogie leaned against a back shelf and folded his arms. „Spooks,” he declared, „are creatures of over-stimulated minds. I'd say you'd hit a squall before you hit Alkali Flat, that a quick-draw artist nearly got you, and that you emerged as sole survivor only by some quirk of luck.”

Winters measured Bogie with approval. „Doc, you know me like a book. I oughtn't pretend to be a lawman; every time I see a gun-toter I've an urge to run and hide. It's a good thing these wandering toughies don't know what a coward I am.” Suddenly Winters had a crawly feeling. He whirled and stared, and a mouse-faced varmint stared back. „Spice Lilloughby, as I live. Waitin' for some free-hearted sucker to buy you a drink, eh? Well, Spicey, I'm your man; Doc, a full glass for a world's champion tightwad.”

Lilloughby got up and ambled forward. „Now, you look here, Winters—you can't make me out a beggar. If I wanted a drink, I could buy one; I've got money, and I've got pride.”

„That you have, Lilly,” said Winters. „Here; this is my token of respect.” He slid a wine glass toward Lilloughby, whose eager fingers closed around it.

„You needn't think you're being generous with me, Winters. I take this as a favor to you. Anybody'd know you're just trying to make Doc think you're big-hearted.”

Winters grinned, paid, and watched a stagecoach dust by from Pangborn Gulch. „Reckon I'll drift along, Doc. Want to see who's dropping off. Never know when some wanted monkey'll show up.”

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Winters left. Lilloughby finished his drink and put down his glass. „No, sir, Doc, I accept no charity. As for Lee Winters, I could buy him out and have money left; I took his offering to please him—that's all.”

Bogie leisurely dried a glass. „Spicewood, you are, indeed, a born-and-bred man of quality. I'd say, too, that when you've become a fossil on time's whitening shore, men will look at you and say, *Here was a gentleman.*”

„You needn't try to be funny, Doc Bogannon. Someday, when I've left this dried-up stink of a town, you'll be proud you knowed me.”

Doc's comeback was interrupted. His saloon's batwing doors squeaked, and a customer entered. And here was a character, if ever was, thought Bogie. He'd been in before. Piper Crane, he'd said his name was—a man in shiny black boots, ivory colored trousers, dirty white vest, cutaway blue coat and cocked hat, of medium height, slender, erect.

Piper Crane removed his hat, swept it low, and restored it to his long-haired, noble head. „Greetings, gentlemen.” He advanced, paused, and bowed toward Spicewood Lilloughby. „Distinguished friend, join me in a drink, as a favor to your humble servant.”

„Lilloughby squared his thin shoulders. „I'm proud to do you a favor, since you put it nice.”

Piper Crane banged down a coin. „Two glasses, Bogannon, and a bottle of wine; we'll repair to a corner of your Elysian palace and drink at leisure.”

At a table, Piper filled their glasses. When they had drunk generously, he leaned toward Lilloughby. He had a small tube, in shape like an astronomer's telescope.

„Sir Lilloughby, I had a reason for removing ourselves a distance; I would reveal a secret. Hold this toward a light and look into its wondrous depths.”

Fingers a-tremble, Lilloughby seized what was only a toy spectroscope. But what he saw within it was a wonderland of entrancing, dream-inspiring colors.

„Never was nothing like this,” he murmured, enchanted. „Never! Never!”

„Right, Sir Lilloughby. Never in your world, but in mine—yes. Through this magic glass, you have a glimpse of your golden future.”

„Never was nothing like this—never!”

„Ah, Lilloughby, you are a kindred spirit. I have two horses, saddled and waiting. Come; I'll show you my kingdom of jewels and gold.”

Gently he removed Lilloughby's fingers and pocketed his magic glass.

Lilloughby ambled after him, murmuring, „Never was nothing like this.”

Outside, Piper Crane did not stop. Back of Bogie's they found two horses, mounted promptly, and rode south to Alkali Flat, then southwestward.

„You,” said Piper, „are destined for great things; your hour draws near.”

After a few miles he began to play a flute, and a voice called ghostily, „Ahoy, there! Who goes?”

„Friends of mighty King Solomon, O Mysterious One.”

Out of starlit gloom a stranger came riding.

„Ah, so you have found another messenger for King Solomon!”

This stranger was bareheaded, stocky, a horseman of excellence, wearing a dark cloak that fluttered back as he rode. He swung alongside Lilloughby. „Piper Crane, who is this?”

„He is Spicewood Lilloughby, great miser of Forlorn Gap, who never allows his wealth out of his sight. Lilloughby, meet Bugler Horn, servant of our mighty king.”

Lilloughby tried to swallow. His throat, dry, had a lump in it.

„I’m going back; you fellers is crazy,” he managed to say.

Bugler Horn thrust a six-gun into Lilloughby’s ribs.

„You can’t go back,” he said. „No man departs until he has seen King Solomon—Solomon on his throne.”

Piper put another gun against Lilloughby’s other side.

„King Solomon has need of you. He’s sending messengers to all of history’s mighty conquerors; like Moses before him, he sends them two and two. One messenger is ready to depart; you are to join him.”

„Now, look here, you fools,” cried Lilloughby, „Solomon’s dead, and you’re crazy; put up them guns.”

While Piper held their captive’s attention, Bugler slipped a derringer from beneath Lilloughby’s coat. Lilloughby slapped for it too late.

„A guest,” said Bugler, „is not permitted armed in Solomon’s presence. He must come humble and submissive.”

Lilloughby’s brain was hazy with wine, but he didn’t like what was happening. If that danged marshal would only show up, Lilloughby could do him a real favor. But Winters was never around when a feller got into a jam.

Spicey resolved to help himself and suddenly heeled his horse. All he got for it was an aggravating disappointment. Piper had seized his bridle.

„For you, Sir Lilloughby,” Piper said, „there is no escape.”

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Thirty minutes later, they rode into King Solomon’s august presence. He was sitting on a rock, jagged mountainsides at his back, Alkali Flat at his feet. A lantern burned on a nearby ledge, and Solomon waited not with golden scepter, but with a bow and arrow across his lap. He was a large man, wearing a crown cut from gilded paper, a purple robe, and sandals. Below and to his right a corpse lay flat, its feet extended eastward.

Piper and Bugler dismounted and pulled Lilloughby off. Piper bowed.

„A messenger, O Wise One,” he said.

King Solomon nodded. „Excellent.” He stared at Lilloughby, gripped his bow and laid arrow to string. „This mortal looks unpromising, but my arrow, probing his heart, will free him of his clumsy, unprepossessing body. He will then travel fast and far.” He nodded to Piper and Bugler. „Sing to him, that he may know his mission.”

Joined here and there by King Solomon himself, they sang instructions for a strange journey. Lilloughby was told to travel eastward. Of Sennacherib, King Solomon demanded an army of Assyrians, a half-million. Of Genghis Khan, five

million. Of Tamerlane, Attila, Alexander, Xerxes Sargon, Ramses—other millions. They were commanded to rendezvous at Armageddon.

Lilloughby was frightened, flattered, and enchanted. He could neither move nor speak. Vaguely he remembered a tough, sarcastic deputy marshal he'd despised. Now he despised him more than ever—because he wasn't there to let Lilloughby make him a rescuing hero. Danged lout!

Singing continued, crazy and grand, and then on a sustained high note King Solomon lifted bow and arrow. With a mighty arm he drew back, and his bowstring twanged.

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Deputy Winters was awake. He had married himself a widow, a mining claim, and a neat cottage with a half-story bedroom upstairs. He had ample reasons for wanting to stay healthy, but he was worried. Through an open window alkaline wind blew in. He'd heard far-off singing; his forehead was damp and cold. He told himself that, of course, he'd heard nothing, that he was merely nervous from that shootout at Rocky Point, a victim of upset imagination.

But then he heard a scream—another death scream. Afterwards there was silence, except for wind whispers.

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Life in Forlorn Gap was uneventful for a few days. No message came for Winters from Brazerville, none from Pangborn Gulch. Stagecoaches arrived on schedule, some leaving passengers, others picking them up. Horsebackers arrived. Latecomers put up overnight in Forlorn Gap. Others stopped only long enough for a drink at Bogie's.

Thursday evening, a different sort of stranger hit town. He hitched at Bogie's and strode in, just as Deputy Winters was about to leave. This stranger was young, as tall as Winters' six feet, mean looking, and wearing silver-plated six-guns.

He stopped, feet well apart, hands alert, fingers itching. „Well, if it ain't a deputy marshal!” His thick lips spread into a crooked, contemptuous smile. „You know, I'm always glad to see a deputy marshal. But do you know what kind I like best? Dead 'uns. Now, deputy marshal, being friendly, I'm Courtney Latimer, Court for short, also knowed as Latigo. A few unfortunate gents would've knowed me as Lightning Latimer—if they'd lived. I reckon you're Deputy Lee Winters.”

Winters eyed him speculatively. Here was a fancy dude, as near an unadulterated smart alec as he'd ever seen. If he wasn't a cold-blooded killer, he was sure headed right for one.

„Yes, Latimer, my name's Winters.”

„Hear you're right fast with a gun, Winters.” Winters shook his head. „False report, son; have a drink.”

„Thanks, but I buy my own. And don't call me son; I figure I'm full-grown.”

Winters turned his back and looked to see who else was present. Three men were at separate tables, one a queer-looking bozo wearing a red cloak and staring forward through heavy black eyebrows.

Winters glanced at Bogie. „Doc, who's that crazy-lookin' eyebrow-peeper?”

Bogie picked out. „That? Oh, that’s Bugler Horn, mining prospector and engineer, so he says.” Winters grunted. „Looks like an off-brand nut to me.” He turned and put down a coin. „Guess I’ll turn in early, Doc; goodnight.”

He brushed with calculated indifference past snarling Court Latimer and ran through a stack of reward posters. One of them gave him a start. A likeness of Court Latimer stared at him insolently.

Bogie poured Latimer a drink. „Winters ever crossed you?”

„Lucky for him, no.”

Bugler Horn rose from his table and came forward, a red cloak flowing down his back. He was a queer-looking bozo, his head large and bushy with black hair, a gleam in his eye, armed with dagger and six-gun.

He eased in close to Latimer. „Brave friend, I’m Bugler Horn. A man like you could be useful to me.”

He nodded, and Latimer, after an appraisal, followed him to a table.

A moment later Doc Bogannon saw them examining an object that looked like a small wooden box. Other customers drifted in, drank, and drifted out.

Then Bogie’s batwings crashed back with violence and Deputy Winters leaped in, six-gun at hip level. „Latimer!”

Bogie stared at Winters, then looked for Court Latimer. „Afraid he’s gone, Winters. Must’ve left with Bugler Horn.”

„He’s a murderer, Doc. A bounty on him to boot.”

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Winters left abruptly. An hour before midnight he was back. „That Latimer polecat’s vanished. Must’ve been just a spook, Doc; any message?”

„No message. So let’s have a nightcap and call it a day.”

Doc’s batwings squeaked inward. „Make it three, gentlemen.”

Both pivoted instantly, Winters with drawn gun. „Ah,” said Bogie, „it’s Piper Crane.”

Winters had not seen this character before. In his cocked hat and cutaway, Piper Crane looked like a history-book picture, George Washington era. A silver-plated six-gun was his only modern touch. At sight of that gun, Winters tensed inwardly. Court Latimer had carried two exactly like it.

At a table Bogie poured wine for all of them. „Winters, a new citizen. Piper Crane. Mineral prospector, I believe.”

„Correct,” said Piper, „and I’ve made a great discovery.” He brought from under his arm a six-inch cubical box, one of its wooden sides displaced largely by glass. He put it down before Winters.

Doc Bogannon had seen it before, then in possession of Bugler Horn; now, Piper Crane had it. Here was something pretty danged odd.

Winters picked it up and peered into it, holding it where lamplight could penetrate it. A strange, fascinating sight met his eyes. By arrangement of mirrors, an illusion of depth had been created. In nothing more than a six-inch box, Winters peered into limitless distance. To one side of center was fastened an egg-sized red stone. Hidden by mirrors set at angles were specimens of goldstone, quartz crystals, emeralds, and rubies. Images included, Winters saw countless jewels, countless streamers of gold and scarlet.

His fingers gripped tightly. „It’s amazing!”

„That red object you see is cinnabar,” Piper commented practically. „I have discovered a cave full of it, along with many precious stones. To me alone, it means nothing. To Winters and me, it could mean fabulous fortune. Officer Winters, if you cared to ride with me, I’d show you my great secret.”

Bogie was alarmed. Bugler and Latimer had examined this same mysterious box. What had become of them?

„It’s late, Winters,” said Bogie.

Piper Crane turned upon Bogie dark-blue eyes, full of mystery and magnanimous pity. „Opportunity knocks without reference to hours. Winters, fortunately, is a practical man, as well as a man of vision.”

Winters gave Bogie a glimpse into Piper’s box, but held onto it. „I’d like to own this, Crane; will you sell it?”

Piper rose. „Come with me, and I’ll make you a present of it.”

He bent and took his box, and Bogie had a close view of his silver-plated gun. A shudder swept him; that gun had belonged to Court Latimer.

He laid a hand on Winters’ arm. „Wait till tomorrow, Winters; a cinnabar cave can’t run off.”

„No time like now,” snapped Winters. „How far is it, Crane?”

„A thirty-minute ride. You can be back by midnight.”

„Winters!” said Doc, sharply. „For your own safety, put this thing off.”

Winters brushed Bogie’s hand away. „Tend to your own affairs, Doc. I’m tired of being a deputy marshal; this is my great chance. On your way, Crane.”

Doc shook his head as Winters departed. Winters was a good lawman, but, thought Doc, his luck was running low.

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Winters and Piper Crane rode southwestward on Alkali Flat, lighted by a quarter-moon. Winters felt himself caught in a spell. A strange lure led him on—to what adventure he had no foretaste.

Piper drew a flute from beneath his cutaway. „Like a bit of music, Winters?”

Winters broke into a sweat. Music! On his last ride across Alkali Flat, he’d heard music. He swallowed hard. „Sure, let’s have music.”

Piper began to play.

A voice hailed them. „Ahoy, there! Who goes?”

Piper lowered his flute. „Servants of King Solomon.”

A rider swept toward them, a cloak flying out behind. Bugler Horn!

Winters wheeled his horse around to Piper’s left. Both men were in front of him then.

Bugler jolted up. „Officer Winters, you should ride before us.”

„Of course,” said Piper. „As King Solomon’s messenger, you should ride ahead and announce our coming.”

„I’ll ride behind,” said Winters shaken by fear, but sustained by rising anger. „Being a lawman, I don’t turn my back on lunatics.”

„Ah!” exclaimed Bugler. „What have we here? This is mutiny.”

„This is discretion,” said Winters, fingers touching gun. Discretion warned him to draw and get it over with. Overwhelming curiosity restrained him.

„Officer Winters is to be commended,” Piper said craftily. „But time is running out. Follow us, Winters, to King Solomon’s throne. Ride hard, too, or we shall outdistance you.”

They dug with spurs, and their horses pounded away. Winters, cursing himself for a great fool, raced after them, determined to get under this crazy business.

Meanwhile, he was scared stiff. Sweat popped, and his face began to sting.

In fifteen minutes they arrived. King Solomon sat upon a rocky throne, a lantern on a ledge beside him, a corpse—Lightning Latimer—stretched at his feet, pointing south.

Death extended its cold hand toward Winters. It had never been closer.

„A new messenger, O Great One!” shouted Piper Crane, as their horses plowed up.

But immediately Piper and Bugler swung and headed back. Winters had wondered how it would come, but he had anticipated this maneuver. He was caught in a three-cornered squeeze. Piper and Bugler were lifting their guns, and Solomon was fitting an arrow to a vicious-looking bow.

But Winters regarded himself as no novice. He giggled savagely. His horse leaped, and bullets cut past where he’d been. Guns roared furiously then, and smoke and dust rolled across Alkali Flat.

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Doc Bogannon sat alone in his saloon. He’d heard distant gunfire, and it boded ill. He held a letter, left with him at midnight by a stage driver. A sense of horror gripped him. He drank, while sweat beaded. Chances were, he’d never see Winters again.

His batwings swung inward slowly.

„Winters!”

Doc rushed forward and helped Winters to a chair, and Winters slumped down, an arrow stuck through his back muscles, both ends protruding, like a needle segmented through a pincushion.

„A drink, Doc, and get that thing out of my back.”

Bogie brought whiskey. „Winters, I never expected to see you again. Why didn’t you listen to me?”

Winters drank slowly. „Now, Doc, cut off one end of that arrow, notch it good and tie cotton around it. Wet it with iodine and pull it through. I may yell, but don’t let that stop you.”

Bogie followed instructions. Winters didn’t scream, but he groaned until both he and Bogie were sick.

Bogie forced a drink into him, and Winters at last calmed.

„What happened, Winters?”

„They was spooks, Doc. That Piper and his buddy, and a loony they called King Solomon.”

Winters had another drink. He sleeved his face. „I was a fool, Doc, to let myself get caught on Alkali Flat, at night at that.”

Doc agreed with him. Then he remembered Winters’ letter. „That came at midnight, Winters. Brazerville stage.”

Winters looked at it, blinking, too dizzy to read. „Read it, Doc.”



Bogie opened it and read.

*Deputy Marshal Lee Winters, Forlorn Gap.*

*Look out for three homicidal maniacs, escapees from Fincastle Tombs.  
Believed to be hiding in some ghost town.*

*Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

Bogie stared at Winters. „Scares me to think about it.”

„Yeah.” Winters grimaced from pain. „Nice of old Huggie to let us know, though.”

