

Master of Indecision

by Lon Williams, 1890-1978

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Deputy Marshal Lee Winters left Rocky Point at noon and traveled by way of Cow Creek and Elkhorn Pass. This was ten miles farther, but he figured on its being much safer than that ghost-infested wasteland of Alkali Flat. Even by this longer route, he counted on reaching Forlorn Gap and home comforts with Myra Winters, his good-looking wife, at least two hours before midnight.

He was three hours out of Elkhorn and riding by moonlight, when he began to wonder whether he shouldn't have gone by Alkali Flat after all. From Elkhorn Pass to Forlorn Gap ran an ancient, lonesome road. White men did not much concern themselves about its past. It was merely a means of getting from one gold town to another, haunted because of stagecoach robberies and murders along its course, but no more forbidding to mad gold-hunters than any other cutthroat trail.

Deputy Winters, however, recalled something Doc Bogannon's half-breed wife had said about it; an ancient warriors' path, Athi-ami-owee, she'd called it, a trail where Shoshone braves had tramped to and fro to test their metal against enemy

tribes in far-off valleys. It had been a death-trail, too, where warrior bands fell in bloody ambush. There were always haunts in a place like this.

Winters had half-expected to tie in with a ghost or two on this winding cliff-lined road, but he hadn't expected to get his daylighters scared out. He didn't see anything; he just heard a voice that came out of a wall of solid rock. It was a spook's voice, of course, for only a spook could live within a crackless, holeless cliff.

It was a quick, hollow voice, hard and mirthless. It said, "Going somewhere, stranger?"

Winters drew rein, hand dropping to six-gun. "What's that?"

It came again. "No use to hurry, stranger. Time and tide have already passed you by. What difference does it make, whether you die tonight or tomorrow? Tarry a while, rest your weary bones, and renew acquaintances with departed souls. You are closer to Happy Hunting Ground than you think."

Winters wanted no truck with disembodied spirits. He lifted bridle leather and giggered with spurs. His horse, Cannon Ball, leaped into action; his clattering hoofs filled canyon and night with wild echoes. Winters looked back at every turn, expecting to see pursuers, but except for him and his speeding horse, Athi-ami-ooee was a lonely, deserted road.

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Doc Bogannon's saloon had been a busy place all evening. His customers were local citizens, as well as travelers who were stopping over at Goodlett Hotel to await transportation either to Pangborn Gulch or to Elkhorn Pass. Then trade had tapered off, citizens and travelers had departed, some nicely braced, some stewed, and some just ordinary happy.

One visitor remained. He sat alone at a table, where he'd been all evening. Doc Bogannon regarded him as one of those queer fellows who never seemed to play out, but always straggled in on opportunity's tail-end. Bogie had seen plenty of them, year by year; halfwits, sneaks, mad-dogs, wolves, skunks, hop-toads, blabber-mouths, prophets, apes and war whoopers. He'd even seen a scissors-grinder, a sewing-machine fixer, and a dimwit leading a goose by a string.

But here was something different; a scrawny, undersized gopher, pert and slim. He was clean shaved, well dressed, and had animated eyebrows, that were always lifting, whether he looked up or down. He hadn't smiled all evening; in fact, he appeared to be pouting about some mild grievance.

Bogie dried a glass and set it back. He eyed his guest curiously. "Service bad, or something?" Eyebrows went up. "I didn't say so."

"Truth is," said Bogie, "you didn't say anything. I was just afraid I'd hurt your feelings. Have I?"

"I won't say you have, and I won't say you haven't; in very truth, I hadn't given it a thought."

"That's fine," said Bogie. He studied his guest a moment. Doc Bogannon was big and tall; in appearance more a statesman than a barkeep. At heart he was a philosopher, curious, and altogether charitable toward human nature. In prying into this gopher's private affairs, he was conscious of no more than a helpful mood.

"I'll tell you how it is with me," said Bogie. "I'm sort of an off-brand missionary. Always like to get acquainted. In case you hadn't heard, I'm Doc Bogannon. Now then, I'd be obliged if you'd just haul off and tell me your name, what your trouble is, and whether it's something I can do to help out."

Eyebrows went up and remained so for many seconds. "My name? According to most reliable sources, it is Horner—Scoby Grimstead Horner. I wouldn't vouch for it absolutely, but according to my information and belief, that's it."

"That ought to satisfy most people," Bogie commented gently. "It's not customary around here to demand birth certificates. Indeed, it's a question how many men pass under their true colors. More than a few, I'd say, are known otherwise than they were christened. You inward or outwards bound?"

"Depends on your point of view," Horner replied, eyebrows lowering slightly. "When I began my journey, I was undoubtedly outward bound. With respect to Forlorn Gap, I was until now inward bound."

Bogie nodded in appreciation. "As matters now stand, you're a voyager in horse latitudes."

"Horse latitudes? Never heard of 'em."

"It's a manner of speaking," said Bogie, arms folded across his chest. "It means that possibly you're stranded, doldrum-struck, or just plain undecided."

It was Horner's turn to nod appreciation. "That's it. I'm undecided! You see, only recently, due to my grandfather's generosity, I've come into considerable money. My grandfather always said that if you have money, make it work for you; invest it, put it to interest, for money makes money. Well, when my grandfather willed me this money, I says to m'self, I says, 'Scoby, put it to work.' And what better place, I asked myself, is there to put money to work than where there's gold? It took me a long time to make up my mind, but when I did make it up, I started—I *moved*. And here I am in Forlorn Gap."

Doc Bogannon wrinkled his big forehead and scratched a corner of it. "Seems to me you quit moving a mite too soon. Gold-mining has sort of petered out in these parts."

Horner twisted slightly in his chair and looked at Doc understandingly. "That's just it. This is not where I meant to stop. However, my gallant horse cantered into this town at a time when I was completely undecided."

"About what?"

"Well, about whether I should go to Elkhorn Pass or to Pangborn Gulch. Since I could not make up my mind, I stopped here to remain until I could reach a decision. I understand there's gold at both places; men getting rich, mining companies being organized, everybody alive with enthusiasm and a rushing boom of good times. But which one shall I go to?"

Bogie shook his head. "Quite a question. Why not toss a coin?"

"And leave it to chance? I was never one to do that."

Doc's batwings squeaked on their hinges and Deputy Marshal Lee Winters strode in. He was a six-foot, lean, weather-beaten veteran who took in everything at a glance. "A drink, Doc."

"Whiskey or wine?"

"Wine. I'm getting off of whiskey."

Bogie poured a glass of wine. "That's strange news. Been seeing ghosts, I suppose."

Winters sipped wine. "Now, Doc, you know there ain't no such things as ghosts. They just exist in men's minds; you've always said so."

"And I say it again," declared Bogie.

Winters turned slowly and stared at the gopher-like character at a table. "Friend of yours, Doc?"

"Oh, yes," said Bogie. "Horner's his name. At least every presumption points in that direction. Mr. Horner, this is my friend, Deputy Marshal Winters."

Horner's eyebrows went up. Otherwise he did not move.

"Horner?" said Winters. "I've heard of him. My ma always called him little Jack. Way I heard it, he sat in a corner a heap. Would you have a drink with me, Mr. Horner?"

Scoby Horner considered it. "Maybe I would, and maybe I wouldn't."

That struck Winters as slightly peevisish. It was slightly irritating, too. "Now, sir, I consider that remark right enlightenin'." He put down his empty glass and laid a coin beside it.

Three strangers drifted in and took a table some distance back. They looked tough, but as far as Winters could see, none of them bore a "wanted" face. They carried heavy armament, but so did all men thereabouts. One of them signaled for liquor.

"Any news, Doc?" Winters asked as Doc loaded a tray.

"Nothing new," said Doc. He glanced at Little Jack Horner, considered whether he was sufficiently unusual to be further pressed upon Winters, but shook his head. "No, Winters, nothing new."

Winters told him goodnight and went out.

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Doc Bogannon delivered his tray of drinks and returned to tidy up before closing time. He turned as his batwings swung inward and a stranger walked confidently in.

And here was a character, if ever was, thought Doc. He was dressed like something out of a bandbox—black suit and boots, black silk hat, stiff-bosom white shirt, collar with wings turned down and snugged with a black bowtie. His hair was black and long, with burnsidies that ran down on a level with his smooth, slightly puckered lips. His dark eyes had a luster like polished agate. "Good evening, sirs," he said airily.

A jaunty voice came back from Bogie's direction. "Good evening, Professor Boro; glad to see you."

This airy newcomer glanced down at Scoby Horner. "And how are you, my excellent friend?" Scoby's eyebrows arched. He replied noncommittally, "That would be hard to say." Professor Boro laid an elbow on Doc's shiny bar. He smiled at Doc. "It's quite apparent that my diminutive friend here is in some sort of distress. Fortunately, it is a part of my mission in life to minister to troubled spirits. Let me have two glasses and a bottle of wine."

Doc set them up and took Boro's money. A voice fell gently from Bogie's lips, "You're a noble person, Professor Boro; we need more like you." Doc rubbed a

hand across his mouth. He didn't quite get it. Maybe he ought to go and talk things over with Deputy Winters, a man who'd had experience with spooks. These ghosts that made a man talk, whether or no, had him stumped.

Professor Boro, bottle under his left arm and both glasses in his left hand, extended his right to Little Jack Horner. "My friend, let's talk it over." As Horner hesitated, he pulled gently. That was sufficient.

They sat at an isolated table and drank wine. "Now," said Boro, "what is your problem?"

Horner, appreciative of Boro's persuasive friendliness, confided in his benefactor. "I'm stranded, languishing in horse latitudes, so to speak."

"You mean you can't make up your mind about something?"

"That's it." Horner told his generous and honest friend all about it; of his rich and wise grandfather, of his own good fortune, of his journey, and of his present indecision. "And now," he added sadly, "with ten thousand dollars in my pocket and a determination to invest it, I can't decide which mining town to go to."

Boro had put a hand over his mouth. He coughed gently. "You are right in seeking investments. And you actually have ten thousand dollars—on your person?"

"I do. I considered putting it in a bank, but could never make up my mind to do so."

Boro leaned forward and became confidential. "I confess to a similar fault, only I carry slightly more than you do; namely, fifty thousand."

Horner's eyebrows arched. "That's a lot of money."

Professor Boro looked disconsolate. "But not enough." He glanced warily about. "Horner, I've struck it rich—a quartz vein only a few miles from here that should yield millions. If two or three of us would pool our capital, in a year's time we'd have gold by wagon loads..."

Bogie saw them leave together. Being busy with a bar customer, he thought nothing of it, though afterwards he wondered if at last Little Jack Horner had made up his mind.

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Horner himself wasn't sure. As he and Professor Boro rode toward Elkhorn Pass by moonlight, he had a most queer feeling. Possibly he'd drunk too much wine; he wasn't habitually a drinker at all. But his queer feeling concerned Professor Boro. He was thinking of Boro not as a man, but as Old Scratch, dressed up as a man. He'd heard of things like that.

Then, when they were passing close to a cliff, Horner heard a short, toneless voice. "Going somewhere, strangers?"

Boro pulled his horse up sharply. "Did you hear something, Horner?"

"I most certainly did. A voice came right out of that cliff."

"Extraordinary," murmured Boro. "We'd better circle around this spot."

Horner heard it again. "Yes, circle around. A good idea."

Boro reined in close to Horner, who'd stopped just ahead. "Did you hear it again?"

"Most certainly did. What is more, I'm heading back; I've changed my mind."

But he had a new strange feeling suddenly, a feeling of something hard against his back. Professor Boro was crowding him. "You're riding into that small cove of pines by yon cliff, friend Horner. We were going into business together; remember? Not that I need a partner exactly; what I need is money." Hidden by cove and pines, he nudged Horner's back. "Hand it over, Mr. Horner." Little Jack said over his shoulder, "But you have fifty thousand; isn't that enough?"

"It would be, if I had it. As matters stand, I have nothing."

"As matters stand, you will still have nothing."

"What are you saying, Horner?"

"My yarn about having ten thousand was merely to catch crooks who fish for suckers; I'm practically penniless."

Boro's voice and manner were ferocious. "Then why did you ride with me?"

Horner's voice disclosed an unsuspected ferocity of his own. "To get your fifty thousand." His actions were as quick as his words. His horse leaped against that of Boro, a six-gun appeared in his hand, and cove and pines filled with gun-roar and acrid black smoke.

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Deputy Lee Winters regarded himself as a lucky man. For one thing, he'd married a beautiful widow, and she'd turned out to be a gentle, loving wife. He'd received as a dowry a mining claim which her deceased husband had owned, also a nice cottage with an upstairs half-story bedroom where they slept. That way they could lock their downstairs shutters and, upstairs, sleep with open windows.

Winters was not asleep. A wind-shift brought a breeze from straight west; mountain air, clean, health-giving. Nights when it came across Alkali Flat, it carried stinging dust and ghostly voices. But tonight, as if funneled down from Elkhorn Pass, it carried a sound more deadly, though less ethereal, than when it swept across Alkali Flat. Winters heard gunshots, two that came almost as one, then three that were spaced with slow, deliberate evenness. Out of that sequence he spelled a fight; one man dead, a single survivor, angry and cruel, doing murder when he could have shown mercy.

Next morning a stagecoach from Brazerville brought Winters a fresh supply of posters—pictures of wanted monkeys who might turn up one place as well as another. Some he hoped would turn up elsewhere than Forlorn Gap. Vicious killers, they were, gun-slicks and fast riders. A letter from, Marshal Hugo Landers was more in point, though not exactly to his liking. It read: Wells-Fargo has reported a number of mysterious killings on its northern route out of Pangborn Gulch. That's not in your bailiwick, of course, but better keep your eye peeled. These sneak murderers have a way of shifting about. Nuts usually, for that reason hard to size up. Yours truly, Hugo Landers.

Winters spread them on his office table, a long line of posters, about as mean looking a bunch of no-goods as he'd seen in years. Then one of them gave him a start; he would have sworn it jumped at him. It was a picture of a middle-aged dude with dark wavy hair, sideburns, large, expressive eyes, and thin, slightly puckered lips. Its subtitle read: *Chaney Few, alias Dr. Goodpasture, alias Professor Boro. Six-feet-two. One hundred eighty pounds. Circus performer, magician, ventriloquist.*

Ventriloquist! It was that word that gave Winters a chill. He hadn't seen this Chaney Few, alias Dr. Goodpasture, but he'd heard him—he'd heard his voice coming out of a cliff.

Winters put away his posters and sleeved his face of cold sweat. He'd made tracks for Forlorn Gap, and that was why he had circulation right then, instead of *rigor mortis*.

But he had to make a trip to Midway Junction, on Brazerville Road. Because his trip resulted in an arrest and delivery of a prisoner to Brazerville, Winters was gone two days.

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His return was late, almost midnight, and time for a nightcap with Doc Bogannon.

"Winters!" Bogie exclaimed, when his batwings swung in. "I was just about to close up. Sit down, and we'll have a nightcap on me."

"And that will be a genuine pleasure," said Winters, although he was not conscious of his having said it, and it was hardly his manner of speaking.

Another voice said airily, "Good evening, gentlemen. May I join you?"

Doc Bogannon stared at his newest customer. "Professor Boro, as I live! Join us, by all means." He hurried around with a wine bottle and three glasses. "Deputy Winters, meet my friend Professor Boro."

Winters had sat down. He didn't get up, and he didn't shake hands. "Boro, eh? When did you become a friend to Professor Boro?"

Doc put down his bottle and glasses. "It's a manner of speaking. I look upon all customers as friends." Doc's mouth opened and his eyes bugged. It was queer, how words dropped from his lips when he wasn't even thinking about them.

Boro slid easily into a chair. "An excellent philosophy, friend Bogannon. It is apparent from your noble form and stature that you are of excellent birth. Why you are here in this near-ghost town of Forlorn Gap is, of course, your own affair, but you could have been a senator, judge, cabinet member, ambassador. We are all creatures of circumstances, however, and one man should be slow to condemn another."

"That's right." Winters didn't know he was going to say that, and his words didn't leave much taste in his mouth.

Doc Bogannon filled their glasses. "Any luck on your latest trip, Winters?"

Winters sipped his drink. In an offhand manner he said, "Fair. Collected three months back pay, and two hundred dollars reward on that monkey I picked up at Midway Junction."

Professor Boro's face was a smiling mask. "I'd call that excellent luck. I've heard it hinted, Winters, that you have a golden touch, also that you lead a charmed life."

Winters leaned forward with sudden interest. "Really now! Imagine!"

"Winters leads a haunted life," said Bogie. "Maybe that's what you mean, Professor, by charmed life."

"Not at all. I mean that Winters missed his calling; he should have gone into business. He has a gift of acquiring wealth; his touch would have been a gift of magic to any enterprise."

Winters leaned back and glanced about. "Looking for something, Winters?" asked Doc. "Yeah. That gopher who was here a few nights ago—Little Jack Horner. What's become of him?" Bogie looked at Boro. "Ah, I remember now. He went away with you, didn't he, Professor?"

Boro assumed an air of pride. "He certainly did. Greatest thing he ever did, too. I might add, since it is virtually a consummated fact, a small group of moneyed men, including Horner, have joined me in a most promising gold-mining enterprise. I've struck it rich, as fine a gold vein as ever was uncovered. We are organizing at Elkhorn Pass what is destined to be a fabulously rich mining company. Those first to invest will, of course, become tremendously wealthy."

"What an opportunity!" Bogie's lips exclaimed.

Winters put down his glass. "Interesting. How long is this opportunity going to remain open?"

"It's closed," said Boro. "That is, it will be by morning."

"You mean it's not yet too late?"

"Are you definitely interested, Winters?"

"Definitely."

Boro looked at his watch. "If we could reach Elkhorn in three hours, I could still get you in."

"What's keeping us then?"

Doc Bogannon booted Winters' leg. "You're doing well as you are, Winters."

Winters stared at Bogie. "You mean I shouldn't snap up a chance like this?"

"He can't mean that, certainly," said Boro.

"Of course not," said Bogie, although he didn't mean to say it.

Winters sprang up. "We're wasting time, Professor. I've wished a thousand times I could get out of this gun-smokin' business."

Boro rose unhurriedly. "It was a pleasure to drink with you, Bogannon."

"And may we repeat again soon," Bogie heard himself saying.

As soon as they were gone, Bogie realized what had been happening. This trickster who called himself Professor Boro was a voice-thrower. Winters ought to know that, too, but of course he didn't; he was too completely taken in.

Bogie ran out. "Winters!"

But they were riding off. Winters appeared not to have heard him.

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Their course was a winding, upward trail. Moonlight and cliff alternated to reveal their way, and to obscure it. Doc Bogannon's half-breed wife had said this was a warrior's road, Athi-ami-owee! Trail of armed ones.

Winters imagined he could see feathered heads flitting from shadow to shadow. Talkative Professor Boro had become mysteriously silent.

Then, where Winters before had heard a voice coming out of a cliff, he heard it again. "Going somewhere, strangers?"

Boro reined back suddenly.

But Winters had anticipated his move and stopped first. Boro was in front of him, lighted clearly by moonbeams. "Did you hear something, Winters?"

"Sure," said Winters. "Did you?"

"I thought so. Rather strange, don't you think?"

“Very. I was just wondering if Little Jack Horner heard it?”

“Horner?”

“Yes. This is where you killed him, Professor Boro.”

Boro was silent, stone-still. Their horses were half a length apart. Winters had his six-gun up, pointing and cocked.

“You grossly misjudge me, Winters.”

“Chaney Few, alias Dr. Goodpasture, alias Professor Boro, do you want to go peaceably, or as a corpse?”

“There’s a terrible mistake here, Winters. But to clear matters I, of course, shall go peaceably.” Boro lifted bridle reins and swung his horse.

It was a trick Winters had seen before. Yet, though he had expected it, he hadn’t expected it to come so fast. He triggered as Boro’s hand flashed down, and Boro’s body jerked. But that didn’t stop him. His horse plunged against that of Winters, and his gun roared. For a fraction of a second fire blazed, and fury echoed from canyon walls.

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Doc Bogannon, sitting alone in his saloon, heard gunfire far away toward Elkhorn Pass. Winters and Boro! To Bogie, it could have been nobody else. This time Winters would not come back. He’d been lucky many, many times, but no man’s luck could last forever.

He heard a horseshoe strike against stone. He was tense, afraid to stir.

Then his batwings swung in.

“Winters!”

Winters stood just inside, pale and shaken. Bogie expected him momentarily to fall on his face, but he didn’t. Instead, he put his fists on his hips, like an irate woman.

“Doc, what will this dang crazy town turn up next?”

Bogie hurried for drinks. “I tried to tell you, Winters. Boro was a voice-thrower. You were too bullheaded to listen.”

Winters eased himself into a chair. “That’s it, Doc; I didn’t want you to tell me. I didn’t want Boro to know we’d caught on. Even so, that voice-throwing baboon was a humdinger. Such a pity he had to be killed.”

