

# **Satan's Wool-Merchant**

**by Lon Williams, 1890-1978**

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Deputy-Marshall Lee Winters rode wearily out of Wild Cat Gulch onto Pangborn Road, a few minutes before sundown, and headed for Forlorn Gap three miles south. Two circumstances conjoined to make that moment a startling one for his big horse, Cannon Ball, and a near fatal one for Winters. From beyond a jutting cliff a long, grotesque shadow fell upon Pangborn Road. That in itself was unnerving to a horse made skittish already by a running gunfight in Wild Cat Gulch. Reversal of whirling wind had simultaneously brought to Cannon Ball's sensitive nostrils an alarming scent. In his equine reasoning, it diffused from that grotesque shadow—gave it substance—so that shadow took on reality as a crawling monster.

Cannon Ball reared and twisted into a corkscrew turn. Winters, tired and relaxed, was caught off-guard; he went out of his saddle and landed in a bed of dust between sharp rocks. His one remaining contact with Cannon Ball was a strip of bridle leather; to that he clung with fierce, angry determination. Then, with

snap-beetle abruptness he flipped over, landed on his feet, and in a couple of jumps was back on top.

„Well, well,” a queer-sounding voice said derisively. „If it ain’t Deputy Marshal Winters hisself, spilled like a shot cougar from a tree-limb.” Winters swung his horse around. What he saw gave him a shiver; it was no wonder, he thought, that sight of its shadow had caused Cannon Ball to throw a fit. Here on horseback before him was a thing that passed as human, yet looked like something out of a collection of horrors. He was a man with long legs, a short, thick torso, and a small, barely-visible head—to all appearances utterly neck-less and half-imbedded between chunky, broad shoulders.

Winters patted his horse. „Steady, boy, it’s human.” Cannon Ball pranced to left and right, pawed, and snorted. Winters continued to stroke his neck. „Fact is, it’s a man on a horse. Name’s Wheezy Mainrod. Wheezy was a butcher at Forlorn Gap, back in its boom-days.”

Wheezy Mainrod had stopped his ambling plug. „So you know me, eh?” His voice was as wheezy as ever. To its wheeziness, qualities of derision and malice had attached themselves. „Sure, I was a butcher in Forlorn Gap, and who’s to say I ain’t still carryin’ on a small business thereabouts? A man can have a share of gold without bein’ a deputy-marshal or a gravel-scratcher, can’t he?”

Cannon Ball rode uneasily at anchor, while Winters kept a tight knee-clamp against his ribs. Winters had a curious eye on two huge canvas bags slung from Mainrod’s saddlehorn, one on each side. „Just what kind of business are you carrying on, Wheezy Mainrod?”

Between Wheezy’s lumpy shoulders and his hat brim, there was but a small aperture, a recess from which Wheezy’s small eyes blinked. He made Winters think of a Texas terrapin, head retracted, but still visible.

„Something I’ve always noticed about you, Winters,” said Wheezy. „You’re one to stick your nose in other people’s business; a meddler, that’s what. But I don’t mind tellin’ you—I’m a wool-merchant. See these two bags of wool? I’m takin’ ’em to a weaver what lives ’twixt here and Pedigo Road. He pays me good money for ’em, too. And that’s what talks with me—money; purty, shiny gold money. Some men gets it one way, some another.”

Curiosity had led Winters to another point of inquiry. Each bag at its bottom had assumed a reddish-brown discoloration. „Looks like you’ve had your wool bags settin’ in tubs of blood, Wheezy. You ain’t sanitary.”

Wheezy Mainrod’s eyes became little chinks of light back in a cave. He wheezed with sinister insinuation, „Ever hear about a cat as was killed by curiosity?”

Winters made another discovery; Wheezy had a six-gun in his right hand, its dangerous end pointed generally in Winters’ direction. It presented no immediate threat, however, Winters figured—though he knew a drawn gun to have several points of advantage over one shoved down tight in a holster. Warily, he scratched his chin and lowered his eyes. „Looks as if blood might be drippin’ from them wool-bags, too; wouldn’t be packin’ a couple of dead sheep, would you, Wheezy?”

Wheezy’s momentary silence was attended by a tensing of his gun-hand. He glanced at Winters’ right hip and wheezed, „If I wanted to take my friend a few chops of mutton, that’d be my business, wouldn’t it? Well, wouldn’t it?”

Mainrod's six-gun lifted to a more convincing position. Winters suddenly appreciated his danger and began to perspire; that dripping blood could have been from something besides sheep meat. Contrary suspicion was inspired and accentuated by Wheezy Mainrod's belligerent coldness.

Winters put an urgent friendliness into his manner. „Yes, sir, Wheezy, your business; you bet your life. Chops of mutton or chops of whatnot, it's sure no affair of mine. So, if you'll excuse this fool horse I'm ridin', I'll get him past you and be on my way.“

Mainrod pulled over and Winters gighed his horse's flanks. Cannon Ball went by in a sideways, rearing walk. When past, he snorted, whirled, and leaped into a run. Winters held on and let him tear. For once he was of one mind with his horse; he wanted no truck with a wool-merchant.

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Lamps of evening appeared one by one in Forlorn Gap. A stagecoach arrived from Elkhorn Pass; dropped a couple of passengers at Goodlett Hotel; changed horses; and drifted on eastward. Horsebackers dusted in, origins and destinations alike unknown. Some put up at Goodlett's; some hitched temporarily at Doc Bogannon's saloon.

Business was good at Bogannon's for several hours: drinkers and card players had their recreation, their good luck and bad, and moved on. Bogie was too busy to take particular note of any customer until they had simmered down to a mere handful. One then stood out with black-sheep distinction—a small man in a small, round hat, with bushy burnsidés, critical eyes, and a pointed chin.

He strode back and forth in front of Bogie's bar and cast disapproving glances hither and yon.

Doc Bogannon had settled down to washing and polishing glasses for a spell, but this promenader roused his interest. „You working off a soreness of some sort, my friend?“

His guest paused and faced Bogannon. „Sir!“ Bogie wasn't sure whether that sir was a rebuke or a question. „No impertinence was intended, Mr.—. Well, now, I don't really believe I've heard your name. I'm Doc Bogannon, if condescension permits you to take note of one so insignificant as I.“

„Circumstances of a wretched existence have taught me to endure every sort of discord, imperfection and nuisance—including persons who are bent on being sociable. My name, since you are determined to be a quidnunc, is Aloysius McGuffy.“

Bogie put down glass and polishing cloth. He placed his big hands, palms down, on his bar and stared in wonder. „Ah, indeed!“ He shook his head in mock amazement. „Now, if you'll indulge my further inquisitiveness, would you, by any chance, be a Boston McGuffy?“

Aloysius McGuffy lifted bushy eyebrows and lowered, expressive mouth-corners. „Boston, eh? How did you know?“

Doc Bogannon leaned back and folded his arms contentedly. He was a tall man—broadly built—with a fine head, luxuriant black hair, and mild, sympathetic eyes. In appearance, he would have graced any position of honor or power; yet, for reasons best known to himself, he was satisfied with life as owner of a saloon and

companion of a half-breed Shoshone wife—in a semi-ghost town of gold-diggers and assorted wayfarers.

He looked upon Aloysius McGuffy not with merited distaste, but with heartfelt affection. „I did not exactly know, McGuffy, that you’re from Boston, but I’ll say this: Boston does put a mark of distinction upon a man.”

„Fa!” popped McGuffy. He resumed his half-angry promenade. “Boston has been my undoing, my curse. Until I saw Boston, I derived some measure of satisfaction from things about me. A clouded sunset, for example, gave me a modest thrill by its evanescent glory. Sweeping clouds inspired vague suggestion of vast, unharnessed power. I saw a measure of beauty in a rosebud, sensed a faint touch of divinity in its fragrance. At night a wind-whisper was not unknown to initiate poetic thoughts, though I confess that it set no ethereal bells to ringing in my soul.” McGuffy swung his arms in a gesture of hopeless frustration. „Then, in Boston, I studied art.”

„Ah,” said Bogie. „So you’re an artist!” McGuffy stopped and stared at him. „I was an artist. I gave it up to escape madness. As an artist I began to see things as they are—not perfect and beautiful, but deformed and ugly. In one deluging rush, I realized that nothing was perfect. I was overcome by that appalling truth; I fled from it as from a pestilence. Yet, wherever I go, it haunts and depresses me.” He swung his arms wide. „It’s everywhere. Just look! That mirror behind you—it is a mass of flaw and blemish. At one spot your image looks like an ogre; at another, a deformed ape. And those dented, lopsided lamps, with their smoke-darkened chimneys. And those—”

Bogannon’s batwings squeaked, and a lean, middle-aged man with a badge and a strapped-down six-gun strode in.

„Winters!” exclaimed Bogie. „Come in and meet a new friend of mine.”

Winters approached, stopped, lifted hands to hips and stared at Aloysius McGuffy. „There’s usually a jinx on your new friends, Doc. What’s wrong with this one?”

Bogie leaned on his bar and smiled broadly. „Deputy Winters, this is Aloysius McGuffy. If I should undertake to characterize him—which I don’t, of course—I’d say he is a most excellent man who is hard to please.”

Winters moved up and planked down a coin. „Maybe a glass of wine would help his disposition. Fill ’em up, Doc; both on me.”

Bogie filled two glasses with sparkling red wine. He slid one to Winters, one toward McGuffy. „Step right up, McGuffy. When Deputy Winters indulges in generosity, it’s big-heartedness at its best, indeed—without a flaw or blemish.”

McGuffy stepped forward with alacrity and lifted his glass. „I wouldn’t be so sure of that; basically, all human behavior is selfish.”

Winters sipped leisurely. „Good wine, though.” McGuffy held his glass toward a light and stuck out his lips in contempt. „Far from pure vintage, I’d say; nothing to compare with madeira. Burgundy is far superior. Champagne, port, hock, sherry—all are much better. This, I would surmise, is merely a cheap grade of claret. Of course Winters is generous—as that term is vulgarly used—but generous with what?” He drank and put down his empty glass. „Generous with what, in ordinary circumstances, I would disdain to touch.”

Winters drained his glass and set it aside. „You know, Doc, when I was a button down in Texas, there was a neighbor boy just like this here McGuffy. At table, when there was fried chicken, he always grabbed for best pieces. Even so, he wasn't satisfied. There's just something in McGuffy makes me think of that wishbone-breast-gizzard-grabber.”

Aloysius McGuffy, unused to reminder of imperfection on his own part, backed away in sudden wrath. „I will not be criticized by a bottom-strata, dust-ridden, desert varmint—here or elsewhere. Especially will I not be criticized by an arrogant, overlording deputy-marshal. I dislike deputy-marshals instinctively.

„It is a peculiar thing I have consistently observed about them. They are products of an amazing transformation. You can take a fellow of most ordinary makeup and ability, put a deputy-marshal badge on his chest, a few legal papers in his pocket, a six-gun on his hip, and he is no longer an ordinary mortal. Suddenly he is a giant who moves astride this narrow world like a Colossus. Imperfection it is—imperfection magnified a thousand fold. A magnitudinous manifestation of that inherent arrogance and evil—”

„Enough,” snapped Winters. „I know when I'm beat; goodnight, Doc.” Winters swung on his heels and made a hurried retreat.

Bogie leaned back again and folded his arms. This Aloysius McGuffy intrigued him, as had so many queer ducks before him. To many of them, Forlorn Gap had been a crossroads of destiny. Some here had departed from accustomed ways, to become earthly saints or unmitigated sinners. Not a few here had their natural or acquired evil tendencies brought to their natural and logical conclusions. Bogie wished—in vain, of course—for a prophetic eye: he would have liked to foresee McGuffy's future, and McGuffy's end.

But a stranger rose from a back table and flapped forward like a blanket in a stiff wind. Now, here was a character, thought Doc, if ever one there was. He was big—bigger than Doc himself—dark, wearing a big black hat whose stiffness had long since departed. Most noticeable, however, of all of his qualities was his overall flabbiness, evident in face, mouth, skin, and joints. Inseparable from that looseness of texture, too, was a flabby imitation of genial spirit.

He moved straight to Aloysius McGuffy and put a big arm about his shoulders, deceptive friendliness wrapping itself around McGuffy as something warm and protective against a frigid world. „Brother to my heart,” said a voice, full of richness and melody. „I am Professor Whitson Pettigrew, lecturer, philosopher and philanthropist. I overheard your learned, observant remarks, McGuffy; they touched me deeply. I, too, have been to Boston, city of industry, commerce and culture. I, too, became a skeptic; for a time I lost contact with all things that lent joy to living. Yet, after a bitter struggle—and as all true artists should do—I found again that which was lost.” Pettigrew glanced at Bogie. „Two glasses of wine, Bogannon. As I was befriended in my darkest hour, so must I befriend this wise, good man. McGuffy is an unhappy captive of fate; I have been designated by a higher destiny as McGuffy's angel of deliverance.”

Bogie filled two glasses and took his pay. In McGuffy he discerned birth of a new spirit, surcease of trouble, contentment after sorrow. A cat in similar situation, thought Bogie, would have begun to purr.

In Whit Pettigrew, Bogie detected a contradiction of qualities. Friendliness—insincerity. Generosity—leonine voracity. If Pettigrew had suddenly gobbled up his charmed captive, Bogie would have been surprised, though not bewildered. Professor Pettigrew was a consummate actor. Bogie himself felt a hypnotic tug; slightly shaken, he grabbed a bar-rag and moved out of range.

A moment later his batwings swung out. McGuffy, under Pettigrew's gentle guidance, was leaving. Bogie shook his head; he was glad it was McGuffy, not he, who was leaving in such weird company.

Outside, Pettigrew drew McGuffy's arm under his own. "Your remarks, McGuffy, about sunsets and sweeping clouds, were divine. With your reasonable cooperation, I shall show you how to ride upon a cloud and live forever in sunset glory. You, I happen to know, have much money on your person, but it means nothing to you; it is only a part of that mundane imperfection which has brought you disillusionment, unfitted you for life among creatures of blemish and sordid aims. Stars should be your companions, your abode a realm of untarnished blue."

Night-wind brushed McGuffy's warm cheeks and cooled them. Fascination slowly yielded to his acquired fixation of fault-finding. As Pettigrew's oily tongue raced along, McGuffy began to think of his companion as a windbag who was not to be trusted. Uneasiness increased when he realized they were passing along an unlighted street—now and then in moonlight, but mostly in shadow. Of Bogannon's saloon, they'd passed out of sight; Goodlett's porch lamp grew dim.

Suddenly McGuffy stopped, pulled against Pettigrew's clamping arm. „All this rosy palaver is missing its objective, whatever it is. Something warns me that I should go back; so... goodnight.”

McGuffy gave his arm a jerk.

But Pettigrew held it tight. „Now, now, sir. Of course I would not deny your wish to do as you please, but do allow me to release you like a gentleman.” He relaxed his hold, and McGuffy sighed. But something had moved behind them; something tapped McGuffy's head, not crushingly, but hard enough to weaken his knees.

He had a sinking sensation, then one of being carried into a building and down a stairway. He regained full consciousness in a lighted cellar, but only to find himself unclothed and strapped securely on his back on a long, narrow workbench. He tried to speak, but discovered he could not; he'd been gagged. He turned his head sideways and saw Professor Pettigrew seated on a tall, sturdy wooden stool.

Pettigrew's flabby lips moved loosely. „You should not have trusted me at all, McGuffy; else, you should have trusted me more.” His voice was low, but minus its former rich melody. Pettigrew glanced up and nodded.

McGuffy's eyes followed that glance. What he saw filled him with horror. It hardly looked human—but it had to be, of course. He was a man with long legs, short torso, huge lumpy shoulders, and a small round head stuck down between them. He stood by and blinked at McGuffy.

McGuffy tried to scream. „Help!” he squeaked. Futility of that squeak appalled him truly; he broke into a cold sweat.

„Meet my efficient friend, Wheezy Mainrod,” said Pettigrew. „Mainrod is a true artist; his specialty is carving. Many a carcass has yielded to his manipulating, slicing touch. You complain, McGuffy, of universal imperfection. Well, here is an

artist who is perfect; ordinarily he makes his operations painless by a quick throat-slice, but at my request he will proceed contrarily in your case. You will suffer, naturally, but ample compensation will be yours in observing a flawless artist at his work. Proceed, Mainrod."

Wheezy Mainrod moved around to McGuffy's feet. He caught a toe between thumb and index finger of his left hand. In his right he held a long knife, its blade a-glitter with sharpness. „Now, me," he wheezed, „I likes to start with little pieces, and work from there."

„Your pleasure is mine," responded Professor Pettigrew. He pulled a bloody canvas bag from a wall hook and tossed it at Mainrod's feet. „Put that by your workbench; it will avoid double work." McGuffy felt sick, felt himself drifting away into a mixed state of dream and fantasy. Mercy's gentle hand thus soothed his brow, closed his eyes against another horror that was about to pass by night in Forlorn Gap. Darkness drew its benign veil...

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Deputy-Marshall Lee Winters had gone to bed, but he was not asleep. Beside him lay his beautiful wife Myra, her gentle face kissed by moonbeams. Her breathing was even, slow, untroubled. When on long, lonely rides he'd taken to count his blessings, he'd thought first of her. Visions of a peaceful life lured him then—a quiet spot in some un-preempted valley, where he could raise cattle, horses, food, and a family. But somewhere he'd heard, or read, a doleful, fatalistic declaration: There is a destiny that shapes our end. Despite that lure of a peaceful life, he would go on, he knew, until a destiny greater than his own volition had shaped his end. It made his skin damp to think of what that end might be.

After his encounter with Wheezy Mainrod on Pangborn Road, Lee hadn't ridden directly home. He'd spent several hours in his office, going through reward posters—scrutinizing pictures of wanted monkeys; giving long study to occasional baboons whom creation had designed for great things but in whose assembly a few screws had been omitted. Run-of-mine gunmen he knew how to meet; it was primarily a matter of being first to draw and trigger. But these geniuses scared him. They lived in two worlds, one of which he was not privileged to enter. Into that exclusive realm, they retired for inspiration, to conceive dark deeds, to emerge with cunningly-wrought schemes which they concealed underneath a cloak of apparent sanity. More than likely, Winters feared, it was one of those two-world apes who'd eventually shape his end. Thinking of it made him weak and angry.

Mail from Brazerville next morning sent him on a two-day, grim chase of a grizzled varmint who'd shot up and robbed a merchant at Rocky Point. Tense and stubborn, tormented by a bullet scratch along his left side, Winters rode back at night across Alkali Flat. He almost wished some ghost would tackle him; he was that thoroughly in a killing mood. Possibly his mood diffused itself across Alkali. At any rate, nothing more than eerie sounds molested him.

„Winters!" exclaimed Doc Bogannon, as his batwings squeaked and Deputy Winters strode in. „You're just in time for a nightcap. My friend and I were just about to indulge; join us, by all means." Winters approached their table as Bogie got up. He stared at Bogie's new friend, an irregular mass of flabby skin and loose-jointed bones.

„Deputy Winters,” said Bogie proudly, „my good friend Professor Whitson Pettigrew. We’ve been having a most charming visit with each other.”

Winters did not offer to shake hands, nor did Pettigrew undertake to rise.

„A pleasure, Officer Winters. Any friend of Bogannon is a friend of Whitson Pettigrew; sit down.”

Winters took Bogie’s chair, faced Pettigrew. „I suppose you and Doc have been discussing philosophy?”

Professor Pettigrew smiled indulgently. „You could call it that.”

Bogie returned with a glass for Winters. He filled it with wine. „Have a good trip, Winters?” Winters displayed a currency holder full of money and passed a dollar to Bogie. „A mean trip, Doc. A longhaired mongrel refused to surrender; I had to shoot him.”

„You came off lucky, as usual,” observed Bogannon, pocketing his dollar bill.

Winters thought of his bullet-scratch, felt its persistent sting. „Luck explains it, Doc; and I’ve got a feelin’ my luck’s likely to play out someday, along about when I’m ready to quit chasin’ these gun-totin’ polecats. I’d quit right now, but I never seem to come to a good quittin’ place.”

Professor Pettigrew leaned forward slightly. „That reminds me, Winters; there’s a matter I’d like to call to your attention as a law officer.”

„Name it.”

„But let’s enjoy our wine,” said Bogannon. „Winters has had enough excitement for a while.”

„Very well,” agreed Pettigrew. „Let us drink first.”

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Winters sipped wine and, through narrowed eyelids, studied Whit Pettigrew. Pettigrew’s face reminded him vaguely of one he’d seen among his pictures of wanted monkeys. Anyhow—here was a genius, he thought. Pettigrew had a fine big head, wavy, thick black hair. Some ways he reminded Winters of Doc Bogannon, too. He’d been born for great things; undoubtedly he was possessed of an intellect of marked superiority.

But then Winters’ eyelids froze. He’d seen a strange light in Pettigrew’s eyes, a gleam of carnivorous ferocity. He felt a chill suddenly, and then alkali dust, dissolving in fresh cold sweat, began to burn his skin.

„Doc, where’s that vinegar bowl you used to keep around?”

Bogie stared at him, surprised. „Oh, sure, Winters; I’ll get it.”

Lee followed him. No words passed between them while Winters washed his face in vinegar, but the deputy had time to think. When they were seated again, Winters glanced casually at Bogie.

„Doc, what’s become of your hard-to-please friend McGuffy?”

Doc scratched a corner of his spacious forehead. „McGuffy? Oh, yes... McGuffy. Why, I haven’t seen McGuffy lately.”

Professor Pettigrew leaned forward, smiled brightly. „McGuffy? Was it McGuffy who could not see life’s charm because of life’s imperfections?”

„No less,” said Bogie. „Ah, I remember now; he went out with you a few evenings ago. Hasn’t been back since.”



Pettigrew sank back. „McGuffy,” he mused. „What a charming person McGuffy turned out to be. Yes, we left here together; we had a most delightful stroll by moonlight. Talked of many things. As a result McGuffy, I’m sure, found himself. You’ll hear no more complaints from him, I venture. Life, as he now sees it, is not something imperfect and repulsive, but an experience of transcendent beauty. McGuffy, I happen to know, has left Forlorn Gap—returned to where he came from. And from all indications, I am confident he won’t be back.”

Winters shoved back his chair. „All I’ve got to say is, Forlorn Gap has lost a first-class bellyacher.” He got up and shifted his belt to give his six-gun a proper feel at his hip. „Enjoyed our nightcap, Doc; goodnight.” He turned to leave. This was one time he couldn’t get away fast enough.

„But wait, Winters!” Professor Pettigrew shoved back his chair and wobbled up. „You forget, Winters; I had to see you on official business.”

Winters caught a quick breath; his face was wet. Pettigrew came flapping after him, preceded him out, beckoned Winters to follow.

Doc Bogannon shook his head, as if awaking from sleep. He gathered up bottle and empty glasses, glanced at his watch, observed that it was midnight. His mind cleared. That man Pettigrew, he realized now, had almost put him under a spell. Now, also, he remembered more vividly about Aloysius McGuffy—remembered his departure with Professor Pettigrew and under what strange fascination Pettigrew had held McGuffy. He thought of a queer look he’d seen in Pettigrew’s eyes, queer talk from his eloquent tongue.

Suddenly he was gripped by a clammy fear for Winters. „Winters!” he shouted. When no answer came, he ran out and looked up and down Forlorn Gap’s lonely, deserted main street. A low half-moon cast long shadows that lay black upon dust and barren walls. „Winters!” he yelled. Still there was no answer; worried to near distraction, Doc tramped back inside, and sat down to wait.

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Pettigrew was saying to Winters in low tones of confidence, „What I had in mind to tell you is that a crime, I fear, has been committed in your town.”

„Nothing startling about that,” said Winters. He’d heard Bogannon’s distraught call, but gave no intimation thereof to Pettigrew. „Nor is this what I’d call a good hour for investigations.”

„True,” said Pettigrew, „but this is exceptional. I have a habit—a foolish one, I admit—of walking abroad at night. Recently, I heard groans in a deserted building and peering through a cranny I saw a man with a knife. A grotesque creature, he was. I could not see his victim, but I did see him lift his knife and plunge it down hard. Groans ceased then; undoubtedly that plunge was a death-thrust. Needless to say, I was frightened. Ah, it was that building there. Bless me, there’s a light in it now. You, as an officer, perhaps should go see what, I dare say, will curdle your blood.”

Winters stepped aside. „I never go before; it’s impolite. You go.”

„Thank you, sir,” said Pettigrew. He stepped in front of Winters and proceeded slowly, bending forward to peer cautiously at a streak of light.

Winters wished for a thousand eyes. He expected something violent to befall him at every moment—an object dropped on him from a roof; a snare pulled tight

around his feet; a knife-thrust into his back; a clubbing blow on his head; some monster leaping at him from a dark recess.

Pettigrew stopped abruptly. „Look there!” he whispered. „There’s a cellar under that building. Something’s moving—”

This, Winters knew, was a critical moment. They had just passed a narrow space between buildings, shrouded in black shadow. Something undoubtedly was hiding there; this pretense of caution and discovery put on by Pettigrew had but one object—to distract Winters’ attention from a trap which had been set for him.

Winters heard a noise; vaguely he saw a misshapen creature leaping upon him. Winters whipped up his six-gun and fired. A club descended toward his head, missed, but jarred his left shoulder. He fired again—point-blank—at a small, round head that silhouetted itself against sky. Two flailing arms closed around his neck. He stepped backward to struggle free, tripped and fell. His breath went out under a dead weight that had fallen with him.

Above, towered Professor Pettigrew, gun in hand. Fire blazed downward. A slug, intended for whatever it might hit, buried itself in a body already dead. Winters’ gun had caught under his back. He tugged to get it free, at last succeeded. He aimed at Pettigrew’s chin; two guns blazed as one.

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In his saloon by a table Doc Bogannon swabbed a perspiring face. When his batwings swung in, he stared, horrified. „Winters! You’re killed.” Winters strode forward and eased himself into a chair. „A little arnica, Doc; I’ve got a bruised shoulder.”

„Winters, you’ve got blood all over your face and neck!”

„Not my blood, Doc. You might fetch a bowl of water, too, and a towel.”

Bogie, about to drop, stumbled off and poured himself a drink of whiskey. He came back with water in a wash basin and a towel over his arm.

„Winters, what happened?”

Winters stood, bent forward and washed his face. He was painstaking and slow with both water and towel. At last he sat down, looked at Bogie and drew a deep, shuddering breath. „Doc, you want to know what happened? Well, I’ll tell you. I ran into a wool-merchant. And something else, Doc. If you want to stay out of trouble, take my advice; don’t ever have no truck with a wool-merchant.”

