

# The Haunted Town

by Lon Williams, 1890-1978

Published: 1953  
in »Real Western Stories«



Deputy Marshal Lee Winters emerged from Enloe Pass on Walden Ridge and glimpsed a few dim lights in Forlorn Gap, three miles away. From Brazerville had been a long, wearisome ride, but lights of home enlivened his spirit, if not his flesh and bones. Cannon Ball must have seen them, too, for he lifted his head and quickened his step.

Cannon Ball was a good, steady horse; big, rangy and tough, yet this had been a hard journey for him. It was mainly because a southeast wind had blown behind him, whipping gusts about his ears, sending dust-devils whirling over dry hills all afternoon, and after dark moaning through pines and crags as something animate and mysterious. Moonlight was intermittent, also, for clouds swept along darkly, and this alternation of light and shadow transformed trees into marching ogres and rocks into ghosts. Several times Cannon Ball had stopped abruptly, head high, body a-tremble, when things stirred in shadow, diffused strange scents dislodged small stones from banks or mountainsides.

Winters, too, was skittish. Duty of office had made him a gunfighter. In discharge of duty, or in obedience to primal law, he'd killed cutthroats, robbers, murderers. Every deadly combat had impressed itself indelibly upon his memory. His conscience was untroubled, yet a man who had killed never thereafter rode or walked alone. Ghosts of dead men kept him company. He saw their last violent actions, heard their defiant shouts, their smoking guns, their surprised groans and death sighs.

He was in a sweaty mood when he entered Forlorn Gap, once a town of five thousand, now composed chiefly of deserted houses. On its outskirts he was passing a tumbledown shack where one Bill Avis had lived, a gloomy gold-digger who was murdered in his own house. Winters observed a faint glow in its one small window. He thought it strange, of course, but then an apparition appeared, window-framed and terrible. It was a huge wolf's head, eyes and mouth aglow with fire. Its appearance had been instantaneous. Out of it had poured a menacing, fierce growl.

Cannon Ball leaped aside and forward. His forward leaps continued. Winters hung grimly on. He'd grown tense upon seeing that mysterious glow in Bill Avis' glassless window, otherwise he'd have landed on his head. As it was, he had a rough ride, almost lost his hat, and he brought Cannon Ball under control only by standing him on his hind feet.

But he was blocks away by then. Moreover, he was no farther away than he wanted to be. Thoughts of going back to investigate never once entered his mind. Indeed, every urge within him made him want not only to keep away from there, but to get farther away. He made sure his sixgun was in its holster. Thereafter he pulled his hat on tight and let Cannon Ball have free rein.

One spot in Forlorn Gap where lights burned brightly was Doc Bogannon's saloon. It was almost midnight, yet a few customers hung on; a drunk who nodded sorrowfully over a bottle; a couple of bearded miners who played cards for small stakes; and a well-dressed, alert, middle-aged, mean-looking stranger who sat by himself at an up-front table and watched them casually.

Doc polished a glass and set it back. He looked down at this neat, tigerish gent. "Don't recall having made your acquaintance, my friend?"

"Now, isn't that a coincidence!" No smile attended that remark. "But I'm not one to be stand-offish. My name is Moxley—Christopher Moxley."

"Not a Boston Moxley, by chance?" Christopher Moxley eased his flattop hat back slightly and surveyed Bogie with a cold, critical eye. "A general sort of Moxley, if you please, sir."

"From here, there, and everywhere, so to speak," Bogie observed placidly. Doc Bogannon was tall and broad, with black hair and broad forehead. Though nature had intended him for greater things than being a barkeep, his philosophy of life included no higher aim than owning a saloon and living quietly with a half-breed Shoshone wife. Yet he looked neither up to nor down upon any man. Likewise he neither approved nor disapproved of his fellow-man, but regarded every wayfarer, good or bad, as being human and entitled to his principles, so long as he left other people alone. Here, certainly, was a character with a marked tendency toward insolence, yet Bogie entertained no ill will on that account.

He added charitably, "A good many people to hit Forlorn Gap have burned their bridges behind them, as it were, deserted their families, exchanged all worldly goods for cash, and struck West. Some, of course, had vague honest notions of going back East, once their fortunes were made, but by and large they're buried in nameless graves, or left in lonely gulches for bird and varmint fare. Not that it matters, I presume, as to man's eternal welfare, whether he's digested by buzzards or by worms."

Christopher Moxley gave Bogie a surly look. "I suppose you're trying to be funny." Bogie smiled conservatively. "I had a schoolteacher back in—well back East—who always said, *There ain't no law agin supposin'.*"

Moxley's jaws tightened. Obviously he wasn't accustomed to being trifled with. Obviously, too, he had no sense of humor. "There may be more law than you think, Bogannon."

Doc's batwings swung inward, and a tall, lean, weather beaten hombre with round, battered hat, sharp nose and dark, cold eyes strode in.

"Winters!" exclaimed Bogie. "Glad to see you."

"A dash of wine, Doc."

Doc set up a glass and filled it. "Winters, you look like you've lost a lot of blood. You're as pale as starch."

Winters' thin nostrils dilated. "Doc, I'm scared stiff."

"Ah, so you've seen another ghost, eh?" Winters downed his wine. "Doc, ever hear of a werewolf?"

"Certainly, but of course it's mere fable."

"What is a werewolf anyhow?"

"According to fable, it's a human in wolf form. Why?"

Winters held his glass for a refill. "I saw one, Doc."

"Oh, naturally," Doc scoffed. "A man who believes in ghosts never fails to see two or three a night. You've had a long ride, clear from Brazerville without a stopover, no doubt. It's near midnight, too, and that's when a man's spook-sight is at its best." Winters turned his back on Bogie. "You're no help at all, Doc." His eyes fell upon Doc's guest, Christopher Moxley. "Well," Winters sniffed. "I thought I'd felt something chilly. Doc, you running a cold storage business?"

Moxley looked Winters up and down. "Another smart gink trying to be funny, eh?" Winters was in a fractious mood. Ghosts not only scared him spitless, they also enraged him. If there was anything he wasn't trying to do, it was to be funny. "Doc," he flung over his right shoulder, "you been trying to melt this icicle with your cheap wit?"

Bogie leaned on his counter. "Winters, you're talking to Christopher Moxley, from here, there, and everywhere. A universal Moxley, so to speak."

"Yeah?" said Winters. "Well, Moxley, don't bite yourself. You might die of snake venom." He slapped down a coin and strode out, and Doc, from a watchful eye corner, saw Moxley's murderous gaze fixed upon Winters' back.

Winters had been gone no more than three minutes when a stranger entered. And here was a character, if ever was, thought Doc. He was a ragbag and in every aspect a bum. He was bareheaded, surly, and his big face hadn't been

shaved in a week. Just inside he paused and, with only his eyes moving, took in all that was to be seen. After a thirsty glance at Doc's shelves of wine and whiskey, he moved slowly toward what appeared his best prospects for help.

Those two gold-diggers, playing for small stakes, glanced up as a shadow moved close. A ragged tramp stopped by their table and settled into a chair. "My name, gentlemen, is Hollywell Dew, better known as Holly Dew. And yours, gentlemen?"

They eased their chairs back. "Lassiter," said one of them. "Ed Lassiter." He nodded toward his friend. "Kehoe Toler."

"So glad to know you, gentlemen. And what must be all too apparent to both of you, I'm a poor, humble beggar, many, many miles from home. Fortune has never smiled upon me, as she has upon you. Accordingly, I would have a small alms from each of you." He put out his left hand, palm up. In his right he held a sixgun, its muzzle oscillating slowly between them. "Far be it from me to be exorbitant; I wouldn't think of accepting more than a couple of double-eagles."

Lassiter and Toler were furious. They had guns in their belts, but they also had sense. Each one handed over a double-eagle.

"Thank you so much, gentlemen," said Holly Dew, pocketing his take.

"You lousy, stinking robber," snarled Toler. "You'll hang for this."

Christopher Moxley stood by them, unannounced. "Something wrong, gentlemen?"

"That skunk robbed us," replied Lassiter. "No such thing," said Holly. "I merely asked for alms."

"But with a gun in hand," declared Toler hotly.

"Did he threaten to shoot you?" asked Moxley.

"Well, no," Lassiter admitted, a bit shame-faced.

"Then there was no robbery," said Moxley. He sat down. "Tell you what I'll do; I'll give each of you a chance to make it back." He looked at Holly. "Dew, I believe you said. Well, Dew, suppose you let Toler have your chair."

He put down a twenty-dollar bill. "This, gentlemen, is called a game of snatch. If Toler will lay a twenty-dollar bill on top of mine, we'll snatch for them. Here, Lassiter, you can signal. No, we better take Dew, who'll be neutral. Holly, you sit there. Toler and I will put our right hands to our chins and when Holly Dew snaps his finger, we'll snatch. Fastest man wins. If bills are torn, big piece takes little piece."

Toler arched his bushy eyebrows at Lassiter. "This is right down my cowpath. As a kid I was called Snatch-cat Toler." He sat down opposite Moxley, with Holly Dew on his right.

They got set. Holly snapped his finger, and they snatched. Toler's thick hand hit a vacant spot, and Moxley's bounced up with two twenty-dollar bills crumpled in its clutch.

Lassiter shouted angrily, "It wasn't done fair. That dirty bum blowed as he snapped. I seen them bills slide as Toler went for 'em. It was a blasted, lousy trick."

Hollywell Dew had slid his chair back. He rose, sixgun again oscillating. "That of course, is a lie. It was done fair, and if anybody wants to dispute it, let him draw." Moxley pulled a sixgun from his under-arm holster. "That is correct. But to avoid trouble, I'll relieve you gentlemen of your hardware." He did as he'd indicated. "But

I shall leave them with Bogannon. You'll no doubt be able to retrieve them after Dew and I are safely on our respective ways."

When Dew and Moxley were gone, Lassiter and Toler rushed for their guns.

"Now, now, gentlemen," Bogannon chided gently. "A famous wit named Sir John Falstaff once said, *Discretion beats bravery all holler*. You go chasing after those bozoes, and you're sure to get shot. Take my advice, and wait for daylight."

"Let me have a drink of whiskey," growled Toler, "and keep your advice to yourself. Give me half a chance at them skunks and I'll let moonbeams through 'em."

"So will I," declared Lassiter. "Them punks are in cahoots, and they're going to pay for it, I'm tellin' you!"

Bogie handed over their guns. "Tell *them*, not me, fellers. But if you're smart, you'll wait for daylight."

They rushed out and looked hither and yon, but their quarry had vanished.

Toler and Lassiter mounted their horses, both declaring what they were going to do to a couple of two-legged polecats if ever they saw them again.

Lassiter rode west and Toler rode east. Toler was still telling himself what he'd do to Hollywell Dew and Cris Moxley, if ever they crossed his path again, when he came even with Bill Avis' tumbledown shack. Without any warning whatever, his horse leaped from under him and took off for open country. Toler himself had caught one glimpse of a window-framed wolf's head, fire gleaming from its mouth and eyes, and simultaneously he'd heard a frightful growl roaring from its depths.

He was stunned momentarily, and when he regained his senses and sat up he was staring at a sixgun, its business end two feet from his forehead. A man he soon recognized as Cris Moxley stood behind it, and beside Moxley crouched a ragged bum named Hollywell Dew.

"Take his gun, Holly."

"You skunks'll take nothing."

Toler grabbed for his sixgun, but Hollywell Dew leaped upon him like a panther on a yearling, and steel claws bit into Toler's throat.

Deputy Winters had dozed, but a terrible dream roused him. Moonlight fell upon his bed. He sat up quietly and stared down at his wife, Myra Winters. Her beautiful face was motionless in sleep. She wasn't a werewolf at all, though he'd dreamed she was.

Winters lay back down and considered himself a lucky man. He'd married a charming widow whose late husband had endowed her with a mining claim and a comfortable, neat cottage. Winters and Myra slept in a half-story room upstairs, where they could have their windows open and not be afraid of possible intruders. Open windows allowed night winds to enter with their freshness and their music.

But they brought strange sounds, too, eerie cries from Alkali Flat, running hoofbeats, roar of distant guns, sometimes human death scream. That same southeast wind which had dogged him and Cannon Ball on their long ride from Brazerville was still blowing. And now it brought a chilling sound—a scream of human terror, dying away to agony, then stillness.

Myra slept on peacefully, but Winters could not then sleep. He wondered how many of Forlorn Gap's fifty-odd citizens were asleep, which one of them had suddenly died. Forlorn Gap, he reflected darkly, was a mysterious, ill-fated spot, a cross-roads town where evil elements sifted out of passing throngs. He never could anticipate what queer sort of varmint would show up next, but of one thing he could be sure—there was an inexhaustible supply.

Next morning after breakfast Winters caught up his horse from his corral feed-rack and pasture. He was thinking, while hay fragrance was strong in his nostrils, that it was about time for him and Myra to settle in one of those secluded, spring-watered valleys west of Forlorn Gap and begin to raise stock and a family. Being a deputy marshal brought him good money, what with salary and rewards for wanted monkeys, but it brought danger, too. What troubled him most, however, was hidden danger, that kind which prowled at night and assumed strange shapes.

But he was still mad from that fright he'd got at Bill Avis' shack, and his first self-assigned job was to ride down there and investigate. When he'd investigated, he rode back and hitched at Bogannon's.

"Mornin', Winters," said Bogie. He'd been alone, forenoon being his idle time.

Winters slouched into a chair. "Doc, we got a dead man on our hands."

Bogie sat opposite him. "No! A stranger?"

"One of our hot-headed fellow-citizens. Kehoe Toler. He's down in Bill Avis' old shack. You won't believe what I'm about to tell you, Doc, but as I rode past last night I saw a wolf's head there, framed in a window, its mouth and eyes gleaming fire. Cannon Ball and I had but a single thought; that was to get away from there, and pronto." Bogie had his eyebrows up. "But what's that got to do with Toler?"

"Toler's throat is marked by prints of wolf teeth."

Bogie swallowed. Sweat popped on his face and stood in beads. "Now I know why you mentioned werewolves last night. You *did* see one."

"But of course it wasn't a werewolf, Doc. There ain't no such thing." Winters got up, whipped out his sixgun and twirled it on his trigger finger. He shoved it back into its holster. "Well, Doc, I don't mind telling you, I'm scared. I don't want no truck with werewolves, nor anything else that ain't human."

Word got around that Forlorn Gap was haunted. But here was a new kind of ghost infestation. Traditionally, ghosts merely scared people; Forlorn Gap's variety killed people. Deputy Winters had regarded gold-diggers as a pretty tough lot, but they laid off from their diggings. He ran into a cluster of them in front of Pepper Neal's store.

They stopped Winters, who was riding Cannon Ball and headed for his office.

Their spokesman, big Moss Tyner, shook his shaggy head. "Look here, Winters, this town's comin' to a bad end. It's haunted. Last night with my own eyes I seed a man ridin' by moonlight, and he didn't have no head."

Another miner butted in. "You're wrong there, Tyner. He had two heads."

"That's right, Tyner," declared another. "I seed him myself. He had two heads, sure as I'm breathin'."

Another sided Tyner. "He didn't have no head, Winters. They can't fool me, 'cause I seen him plain as day."

“That’s right, Winters. More’n that, he was mournin’ about it. I heerd ’im goin’ on, *I want my head, I want my head.*”

Tall Mitch Tomlinson stepped forward and spat tobacco juice. “They’re both right, Winters. There was two of ’em. That one as had no head was chasin’ t’other’n. Both was ridin’ like all forty, and him as had no head was wailin’, *I want my head, I want my head.*”

Winters didn’t know whether to laugh or cuss. He decided to cuss, but he did it silently.

Next day they were there again. Again they stopped Winters.

Moss Tyner once more led off. “Know something, Winters? I’ve always heerd it said there’s a medicine for every ill and a worm for every fruit. Well, what do you suppose has showed up now?”

Winters shifted sideways in his saddle. “Gents, I wouldn’t know.”

“A charm-merchant, by gum!”

“No!”

“Not only that, he’s sold Tip Hogan’s wife one of them charms. It’s a little wooden man with a round bottom. So long as he’s settin’ upright, no harm can come to you. He’s got a magic liquid in him that makes him set up. This charm merchant says this little feller will need a refill in about a week. That’s when he’s comin’ ’round again.”

“How about them night-prowlers, man with no head and man with two heads?” asked Winters.

“Oh, they’re still ridin’. They go down Whaley Gulch road every night at exactly one hour after midnight. Two of ’em, sure enough.”

“What does this charm merchant get for his little wooden man that sets up?” asked Winters.

Tip Hogan was pulled forward. Hogan looked cowed and worried.

“Speak up, Hogan,” said Moss Tyner.

“Winters, it was fifty dollars.”

Winters lifted his dark eyebrows in surprise.

“And a refill is five dollars,” Hogan added.

Winters was furious. “How many has he sold?”

“A good many.”

“Another thing,” said tall Mitch Tomlinson. “Mag Hickerson ordered him out of her house, and that night she saw a wolf looking in at her window. She swore that wolf had fire in his eyes and flame spouting from his mouth.”

“And next day she bought a little man?” Winters asked.

“Next day she bought a little man,” said Tomlinson.

Winters was out of town for a few days. Before leaving, he’d presented his wife a new sixgun he’d taken off a wanted monkey and taught her how to use it. Upon his return he hitched at Goodlett’s, instead of Bogannon’s. It was an hour before midnight when he dropped in at Bogie’s for a drink.

Business had been good, but Bogie was not happy.

“Winters!” It was a kind of glad shout.

Winters moved up and ordered a glass of wine. “Any news, Doc?”

Doc stooped behind his bar as if looking for something. "There's trouble brewing, Winters. People are scared to death. Three families have moved away already. Another dead man has been found, his throat slashed by wolf fangs."

Winters turned his back on Bogie and sipped wine. What looked like a gunfight a-making caught his attention. He swallowed his wine and moved quickly to investigate.

"What's going on here?" He recognized Cris Moxley. A big-faced tramp with a waving sixgun he did not recognize.

Moxley had assumed a peacemaker's role. "These two gold-diggers took exception to a bit a charity, that's all. Holly Dew here, a poor, bumble beggar, merely asked these gentlemen for alms."

"At gun-point," growled a miner. He and his companion had shoved back their chairs, and stood up.

"Purely a misunderstanding," said Moxley. He sat down. "Here; I'll give you men a chance to win your money back." He put down a twenty-dollar bill and explained his game of snatch.

Winters shoved around to an opposite chair. "I'll take you up on that." He glanced up. "How much did you suckers donate to this poor, humble beggar?"

"Twenty apiece, by gonnies!" one of them answered. "And do you think we'd of give that much out of our boundin' goodness? No, by gonnies! He had a gun on us."

"Never mind that," snapped Winters.

Doc Bogannon shoved in behind Winters. This game was not new to him; he'd seen it going on for a week.

"Winters!"

"Don't bother me, Doc. Stand back. Everybody stand back; I need room." Winters had his chair well back. He leaned forward, chin on his right hand. Holly Dew was on his right, hand raised, ready to snap his finger. Winters had put down his twenty.

Men held their breaths, and Holly snapped. Winters' hand smacked quick and hard, but it hit bare table. It was Moxley's hand that took away two crumpled bills.

A miner shouted, "He blowed 'em. Dew blowed 'em. I seed 'em shift."

"Never mind!" clipped Winters. "We'll try again, this time with gold money. He laid down a double-eagle. "Match it, Moxley."

"That wasn't my proposition," said Moxley. He slid his chair back.

"Then he did blow," said Winters. Holly Dew eased his chair back. "That, of course, is a lie."

"Of course," said Moxley.

Winters sprang sideways, his sixgun roared twice. Dew and Moxley sat rigid for half a second, then they slumped, each with a bullet hole in his head. Their guns, unfired, slid from their hands.

Winters stood erect and holstered his hot gun. He sleeved sweat from his face. "There's your night-riders. Two-head Moxley and No-head Hollyhawk"

Doc Bogannon took out a bandanna and wiped his damp face. "What do you mean, Winters?"



“Hold everything and I’ll show you.” Winters went out and returned at once with a big suitcase. “I got this from their room at Goodlett Hotel.” He opened it before their popping eyes.

What they saw was as queer an assortment of articles as they’d ever laid eyes on. It began with a big wolf’s head, mounted on a short stick. Inside was a short candle, its wick black. Next were two black robes that enclosed shoulder-shaped boxes, one square on top, one with two wax heads. There were false faces, too, a couple of Indian scalps, an assortment of beards, mustaches and bottles. There was a pair of iron claws, hinged to fit a man’s hand. There was even a hairy headgear with a pair of short horns.

“Old Scratch himself,” said a gold-digger. He looked at his buddy.

His buddy looked at him. “That charm merchant!”

“Yeah. Wonder if he’s still around?” Winters was busy with repacking his suitcase. He appeared not to notice as two bearded gold-diggers eased out through Bogie’s batwings.

Bogie went for glasses and a bottle of wine. “Winters, it’s time for our usual night cap. In a mood for one?”

Winters moved to another table. “Never was more so, Doc.”

Bogie returned with two glasses and a bottle. He poured, then sat down. As he drank he thought of something. It was such a startling thought that it almost strangled him.

He coughed and gagged. At length he put down his glass and blew his nose.

“Winters! They’ll hang that charm merchant!”

“Yeah?” Winters drank leisurely, his face impassive.

“Well, Winters, aren’t you going to do anything about it?”

Winters set his glass down hard. “Now, you look here, Doc. You ought to know me better than that. You ought to know I don’t go around stickin’ my nose in other people’s business.”

Bogie took up his glass again. “That’s right, Winters; you never bothered anybody in your life.”

Winters passed his glass. “Besides, if a charm merchant can’t take care of hisself, what could he expect of me? I ain’t got no charms to pass around. Go head, Doc; fill ’er up.”

