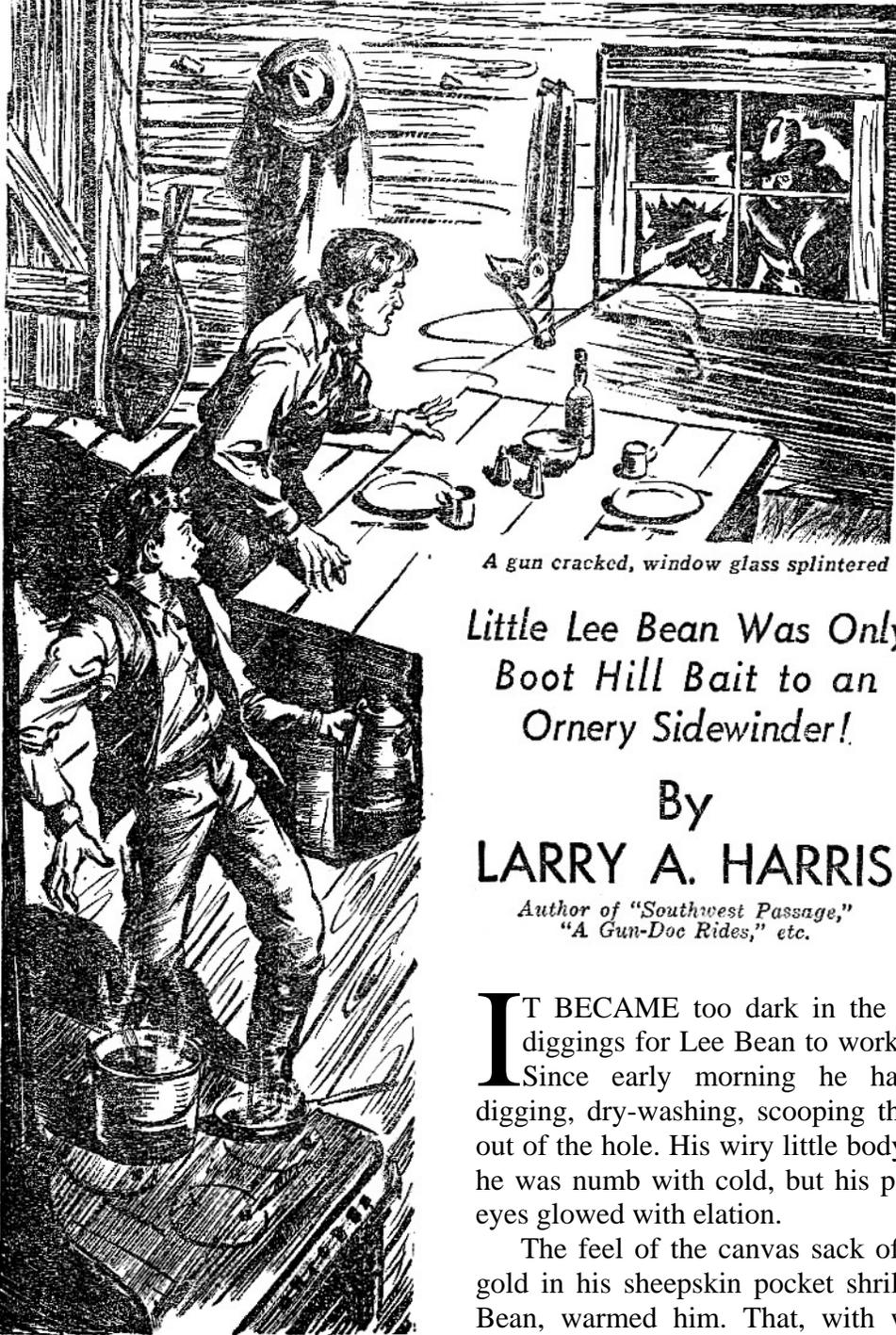


# KILLER TRAP



*A gun cracked, window glass splintered*

*Little Lee Bean Was Only  
Boot Hill Bait to an  
Ornery Sidewinder!*

By  
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"A Gun-Doc Rides," etc.*

**I**T BECAME too dark in the shallow diggings for Lee Bean to work longer. Since early morning he had been digging, dry-washing, scooping the muck out of the hole. His wiry little body ached; he was numb with cold, but his pale blue eyes glowed with elation.

The feel of the canvas sack of nugget gold in his sheepskin pocket shrilled Lee Bean, warmed him. That, with what he and Big Gregg Kilborne had dug the past

two days meant wealth, independence. All sign pointed to plenty more gold in the side of this hill.

Bean stooped, picked up his shovel and pick. He laughed exultantly. The shock of finding himself suddenly rich was still a new emotion to him.

"We're rich!" he cried softly. "Me'n Gregg and Mart Lambert. Old Mart won't have to worry no more about losin' cows in the snowdrifts. He can sell out. Then the three of us will buy a ranch down along the Border—a real ranch!"

Wild dreams flashed through Lee Bean's mind. He hurried out to the mouth of the hole where he had left his bony old horse. He talked to the animal as he thonged the tools on the animal's back. He talked with all the heart-felt devotion a man can have for a horse.

Buttoning up his sheepskin, tugging lower his Stetson, he peered out cautiously. Snowdrifts were piled high in the small canyon. Yonder on the opposite hillside the pine trees stood out in sharp relief against the white blanket. The leaden skies had darkened. A howling, biting wind had sprung up and not a soul was in sight, only the loneliness of the timbered hills at nightfall, the wail of the wind.

**Y**ET, BEAN was wary. A month ago, when he and Big Gregg Kilborne had left the home ranch, old Mart Lambert had warned them to keep their eyes open. And that was before Mart Lambert had even dreamed of his two hired men finding a wealth of gold in these hills.

"You an' Bean take the old line-shack up in the Mescaleros, Gregg," Mart Lambert had said. "Take plenty of grub an' take keer of yoreselves. Rake the draws fer strays an' bunch 'em in the corral. There's enough hay up there to tide 'em through the winter. Yuh'll be snowed in in about a month. But mostly, keep yore

eyes peeled for Red Matson. That there killer is hidin' out up there somewheres. He'd kill you both fer a box of shells."

Lee Bean had sensed the worry in old Mart's voice that day. He knew that old Mart was on the ragged edge of bankruptcy. Everybody in Rincon knew that Mart had strained his credit the limit to buy supplies to send his "two boys" up to his line-shack. Now—

Lee Bean chuckled joyously. Old Mart wouldn't have to worry any more about straining his credit. He'd give a lot to see the surprise, the happiness in Mart's eyes when Gregg reached the ranch with the news of the gold strike. The howling icy wind whipped at Lee Bean's frail body. He ducked his head lower against the awful blast. Through the deep snow he trudged, the trembling horse at his heels. The cold cut through Bean's scuffed, high-heeled boots. The worn denims about his legs felt like so much paper.

A shrill whine close to his head stopped Bean. It wasn't the wind. Only one thing could make a sound like that—a bullet! Then the canyon echoed to a gunshot!

Bean heard the smash of the bullet as it struck a huge boulder within two feet of him. He stood still, heart pounding. Fear gripped him.

It was like the time he was a deputy in Rincon; the time the masked man raced out of the bank and everybody behind cover was yelling for Deputy Lee Bean to shoot him. Bean could have killed the stick-up. But it would have been cold-blooded murder. And Deputy Lee Bean had stood frozen, paralyzed. He was still standing that way, half dazed, when the mayor of Rincon came up and tapped him on the shoulder and told him he'd better turn in his star.

Now Bean's eyes searched the timbered hills about him. The swirling

snow blinded him. Panic surged through him. Each second he waited for a leaden slug to smash into his body. Waited to feel the sickening horror of death rob him of life.

“Don’t!” he screamed frantically. “Don’t shoot me! I ain’t got a gun!” He didn’t stop to think that his voice was drowned by the shrieking wind. Beneath the beard his tanned face drained ashen. The deep snow prevented his running off the dim trail for cover. Anyhow he had no idea where the bushwhacker was hidden.

“Gregg!” Lee Bean yelled helplessly. “Gregg!”

For four years Lee Bean had always looked to Gregg Kilborne for help. But the sudden realization that Gregg wasn’t here to help him deepened Bean’s panic. Then with a sudden burst of energy he started running. He stumbled, sprawled in the snow. He came to his feet, groping blindly, his horse following him at a trot.

It was black night when he rounded a curve in the canyon. Ahead through the swirling storm the lighted window of the line-shack beckoned to him. He was safe now. He fought back the terrifying fear, the weakness in his knees. He didn’t want Gregg to know what had happened, that he was afraid. Gregg would laugh his booming laugh, scorn him.

Bean stabled his horse, fed him. When he left the dilapidated shed he closed the door behind him. Off in the corrals the cattle stood bunched beneath the scant shelter, their plaintive moans riding the wind.

Stomping the snow off his boots, Bean pushed through the shack door. Gregg Kilborne was bent over a red-hot wood stove, cooking. He looked up quickly, straightened. Surprise shone in his beady black eyes.

“Look like yuh’d seen a ghost, Bean,” he rumbled finally. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothin,’ Gregg,” Bean said, very weakly.

Bean tried to grin, but failed. He shook off his heavy sheepskin, eased up to the stove to get warm.

“What’d yuh dig out today?” Gregg Kilborne rapped.

Bean had forgotten the gold. Quickly he turned back to his sheepskin, produced the bulging canvas sack. His bony hands trembled. He laughed shakily.

“This much, Gregg!” he said tremulously. “With what we’ve already got there’s enough to make all three of us rich. Think of it, Gregg, we won’t have to work no more!”

“I’m thinkin’ of that, Bean,” Gregg said queerly.

HE took the sack of gold from the little man, stood fingering it, weighing it. He looked away. Bean didn’t see the greedy gleam flick into his pard’s eyes.

“I can put old Nell in a green pasture some place—”

“Always thinkin’ of that old nag, ain’t yuh, Bean?”

“Shore,” said Bean softly. “She’s been loyal to me, Gregg. She’s been a real pard to me—like you.”

Big Gregg Kilborne grinned. He often grinned at the things little Lee Bean did and said, but Bean didn’t mind. Lee Bean knew Gregg Kilborne wasn’t a perfect man. But he blinded himself to Kilborne’s faults. In Gregg Kilborne, Bean saw all that he had wanted to be—and wasn’t.

Gregg Kilborne busied himself setting out the meal of sourdough bread and *frijoles*. By the fluttery lamp the two men ate their meal in silence for the most part. Big Gregg wolfed his food, his eyes on the plate. Worry, concern roweled Bean.

“Gregg, listen,” he blurted anxiously, “you ain’t aimin’ to head for the ranch tonight, are yuh? Not with this storm

ragin'. Better put it off another day, Gregg."

Gregg Kilborne looked up, black eyes thinning with scorn. Then he broke out into a laugh that wasn't pleasant.

"Listen yoreself, half pint!" he bellowed. "Mebbe yuh couldn't buck this storm at night an' make it. But *I* can!" His mighty chest swelled as he stomped to his feet. "You stay here, dig what yuh can. Bury all yuh git out there in the spring bucket with the rest. It'll be safe there. I've slept all day an' feel fine!"

"But Gregg—"

"Shut up, Bean!" Gregg roared angrily.

He tried to laugh again then. He told Bean there was nothing to worry about. Hell, he was an expert on snowshoes. He'd get over the drifts. He'd reach the Bent L the second night. Getting word to old Mart was important. Mart Lambert could hurry into Rincon, file their mining claim. Mart could send out supplies. The spring thaw would start any time now. Then a horse could get through.

"I'll sleep tomorrow night at the old Indian's hut," Gregg finished.

**B**EAN knew that any argument would be lost on Big Gregg. Only a man of Gregg's courage would face the task ahead. So Bean helped Gregg on with his pack, buckled the snowshoes on to his lace boots.

"Be careful, Gregg," Bean said huskily, when Gregg reached the door. "I'll be prayin' fer yuh."

"Got to hurry," Gregg rumbled.

Then he was gone. The shack door was closed. And little Lee Bean stood alone, an awful feel of emptiness in the pit of his stomach. Outside the wind moaned like the voices of dying men—

Lee Bean couldn't sleep that night. On his drafty bunk he lay beneath the blankets, shivering. The gnawing fear of

loneliness ate into his vitals. He had come to rely wholly upon Gregg. Gregg was his pardner, and when heads turned to stare at the easy grace of the big gent's powerful body, Bean thrilled with pride. It mattered little that people utterly ignored Bean when big Gregg was around.

Stories of Gregg's courage and strength were legend for miles around. What if Gregg did swagger a little and tell stories of how he had once whipped an army of Mexican renegades down on the Border? Folks in Rincon town believed him.

Four years ago when Gregg had ridden into Mart Lambert's Bent L and got a job, Lee Bean had looked at him in awe. If Bean had ever been blessed with a son he'd wanted him like Gregg, faults and all. And when Gregg came to accept Bean as his pard it was the happiest time of Bean's life.

Bean ignored the folks who laughed at his idolatry of big Gregg. They, too, thought a lot of Gregg. Everything Gregg did was all right, even when a fine young fellow like him should take up with a skinny little jigger like Lee Bean. Those folks couldn't forget the time Bean was a deputy and had a chance to stop a bank robbery and didn't—

Bean dozed off into a fitful sleep. Nightmares deviled him. He'd never seen Red Matson, the outlaw, hiding out in these hills. But now Matson's sneering face haunted him. He thought Matson was in the hut with him, searching for their gold. He woke with a start, cold with sweat.

Then he noticed the comforting light of early morning streaming through the window. Dressing, he grabbed up the sack of gold he had dug the day before, rushed outside.

The red, wintry sun was just peeping over the timbered hills to the east. Bean

plunged through the snow to a bubbling icy-rimmed spring a hundred yards from the shack. Here Bean and Gregg had cleared away the snowdrifts. They had dug a hole in the spring and hidden a lidded bucket that held their gold.

With trembling, cold-numbed fingers, Bean drew up the bucket. Three other sacks of nugget gold were in it. He placed the one he had with the others, quickly lowered the bucket into the mud beneath the surface of the water.

His thin face was clammy when he rose. He glanced about, saw no one. He was running back to the cabin when a startled curse broke past his lips. The door of the shed stood open, ripped from its hinges by the wind. The stall was empty!

Near the shed Bean stopped, stricken. His sleep-drugged eyes searched the hillsides. He started to run off through the snow, but stopped.

"Nell!" he called out hopelessly. "Nell!"

The echo of his voice died, and little Lee Bean just stood there like a man who has been robbed of the greatest thing in life. He repeated his call. His thin shoulders slumped. Then a glad cry escaped him as he spotted the horse's tracks, heading up the hill.

Bean trailed the animal at a run. He ran until his lungs felt as if they would burst. He stumbled through huge drifts, clawed at clumps of pinon brush. His frosty breath broke past his parted lips in hissing sobs.

A quarter mile from the line-shack Bean came up to his horse's remains. It wasn't a pleasant sight. Sick, shaken, Bean stopped near the spot that told a gruesome story. There were bear tracks all around where the horse had fallen. Blood stained the snow. Some time during the night wolves had finished the ghastly job.

Bean whispered his horse's name like a man praying. A lump came into his

throat. Tears misted his eyes. He'd thought a lot of that old burr-tail, almost as much as he did of Gregg.

There was nothing he could do. He turned back toward the line-shack, remembering the mornings when he'd found the bear's tracks in the snow near the spring. On two different occasions he and Gregg had heard that bear smashing through the brush on the hillside. Once Gregg had drawn his pistol and fired, only to hear the bear turn and run.

Grief struck deeper at Bean than the thoughts of gold. An idea occurred to him when he reached the line-shack. Killing the bear that had slaughtered his feeble horse dominated him. Tomorrow he could dig more gold. Gregg wouldn't return for at least four days.

**F**ROM the shack Bean got a rope and an axe. He didn't take time to cook breakfast. Near the spring he cleared off more snow, drove a heavy forked stake into the frozen ground. He worked as hard as he had ever worked digging gold.

Noon came and passed. It was the middle of the afternoon before Bean's task was finished. By roping a big sapling he had triggered it to the stake with another short stick. From this he built a large loop, baited the trigger rope with raw beef. He had completed his trap by tying a cowbell to the rope. The slightest touch of that trigger string and the sapling would jerk erect, the loop would likely snatch its victim.

Bean viewed his handiwork. He was proud of it. But the deadliness of it awed him.

"Mebbe I can square things for yuh now, Nell," he murmured bitterly.

He returned to the shed, pitched hay to the cattle. The chore done, he went to the diggings and worked for an hour or more. But he kept thinking of his horse that had

been killed. He kept worrying about Gregg who was somewhere trudging through the snow.

No gold was found to reward him. When night came he trudged tiredly back to the shack. He built a roaring fire and nibbled at some jerky.

That night he knelt at his bunk.

"Watch out for Gregg, God," he prayed. "Get him there and back safe. He's my pard."

ABOUT the time Lee Bean came upon the remains of his horse, big Gregg Kilborne reached the outskirts of Rincon. All night long he had plodded through the drifts, the "norther" whipping at his strong body.

Now as he peered ahead down the deserted, snow-banked street his great chest arched.

Smoke spiraled from the chimneys of the small 'dobe homes flanking the street. Ahead the false-fronted buildings were just beginning to show signs of doing business. Two drooping-headed horses stood in front of the sheriff's office. The lanky proprietor of the general store stepped out on the plank walk, a broom in his hand. He stopped sweeping off the snow as he saw Gregg approach.

"Hullo, Gregg!" he called, surprised. "Thought you an' Lee Bean was snowed in out at the line-shack."

Gregg nodded patronizingly. "Business fetched me in, Trotter."

"An' yuh walked?"

"Walked," said Gregg.

"Well I'll be damned!" murmured Trotter.

Gregg walked on, his great strides carrying him to a small frame building which bore the sign "Land Office." Behind him the lanky storeman stared.

A sallow, bald man with bony fingers greeted Gregg in the land office. He

looked up into Gregg's thin black eyes with the respect he thought a man of Gregg's greatness deserved.

"What can I do for you, Mister Kilborne?"

Gregg told him he wanted to file on the northeast corner of section eighty-eight. The bald man's brow wrinkled.

"Why, that there's government all right, but it's leased by Mister Lambert—"

"His lease has expired," Gregg rapped impatiently. "I happen to know. Anyhow, I want to file a mining claim."

The land clerk looked up Mart Lambert's lease. It *had* expired. Pinched financially, old Mart hadn't had the money to renew it. He'd gone ahead, used the land, and nobody had said anything about it.

"And you want a mining claim up there?" asked the clerk. His interest quickened. "Why, is they gold—"

"Plenty!" rumbled big Gregg. "Do as I say an' hurry. I got business to attend to." The bony-fingered clerk busied himself, filling out papers. With mock concern in his voice Gregg told the land clerk that he and Lee Bean had found gold near the shack, enough to make them both rich. They'd see that old Mart Lambert was taken care of. Mart Lambert was a good man, and Gregg liked him.

Then Gregg told how he had slaved and suffered and starved for a month at the line-shack. He almost forgot to mention Lee Bean. He let worry creep into his voice when he told how he'd cut sign of Red Matson's presence in the hills.

"So I want to file this claim in my name and Lee Bean's," Gregg continued benignly. "That way if something should happen to me gittin' back the mine would go to Bean. I want Bean to have my share an' yuh'll be a witness to it. A mighty fine pard is Bean."

The bald-headed land clerk's eyes

showed that he thought big Gregg Kilborne was about the squarest-shooting, finest young gent he had ever met.

"Yuh're all right, Mister Gregg," he murmured. "But yuh ain't goin' to tackle that trip back to the shack right off, are you? It'll thaw today. In a day or two—"

Big Gregg laughed his booming laugh. Hell, the snowdrifts couldn't stop him. He came down out of the hills all right. He'd get back the same way.

With the necessary papers in his pocket he barged outside. A Chink restaurant beckoned with the smell of cooking food. But Gregg hurried out of town. He had cold jerky in the pack on his back. He chewed the juice out of it as he trudged through the snow toward the hills.

The sun was dazzling on the snow. Gregg's eyes became bloodshot. Once he stumbled down a steep cutbank into a high drift. Cursing, he clawed his way out, plunged on deep into the pine lanes.

Toward noon he came to where he had left his snowshoes. Buckling them to his lace boots he slid across the snowy surface at a faster pace.

LATE that afternoon he departed from his trail, cut off to the south. He swore, suddenly conscious of the tremble in his muscular, columnlike legs. His eyes shone with the feverish lust of a man who had seen gold—and wanted it.

As nightfall blanketed the hills, he dipped down into a blind canyon. Almost hidden by huge boulders and scrub oak stood a small ramshackle log cabin. The flicker of lamp light shone at a single dirty window.

A man stepped into the doorway as Gregg approached out of the gloom. Gregg shouted, came forward slowly.

"It's me, Red! Lower that damned rifle!"

Red Matson grinned wolfishly. "A gun

scare yuh, Gregg?"

Gregg swore, voice thick with anger. He stomped into the cabin and Red Matson closed the door behind them. The outlaw produced a jug.

"Better take a long swig, Gregg. Yuh look peaked."

Gregg took a long drink. Color crept into his cheeks. His shifty eyes smoldered with anger.

"Long time no see, Gregg," the outlaw grinned. "Who do yuh want me to kill now?"

Gregg suddenly towered over the shaggy-haired, double-gunned outlaw. But Red Matson wasn't the kind to flinch. His sharp, coyote features marked him with the indelible stamp of killer.

"Kill?" snarled Big Gregg savagely. "I give yuh five hundred to beef Lee Bean an' what did yuh do?"

"Missed him," answered Red Matson coolly. "It was almost dark."

Rage darkened Gregg's face. "I'm givin' yuh one more chance to earn that money, Matson! We're headin' for the line-shack tonight—you an' me. I'll be there to make shore yuh do the job. An' if yuh miss this time I'll—"

"Yuh'll what, Gregg?" sneered the outlaw.

"Turn yuh in!" roared Big Gregg furiously.

A killer's gleam lit Red Matson's eyes. He stood fingering the butt of one of his guns. A smirking grin curled his lips, and then he laughed mirthlessly. It was the first time anyone had ever laughed at Big Gregg, but he took it. He was afraid and he showed it.

"Why don't *you* beef yore little pard?" Matson asked softly.

Gregg's eyes twitched. "Why, I—"

"Yuh're yella, Gregg," Red Matson grated. "Yuh don't need to explain. An' for the life of me I can't *sabe* how yuh got

everybody bowin' an' scrapin' to yuh. Yuh're a belly-crawlin' snake, Gregg. Yuh was one when you an' me rode with the wild bunch. Yuh sold out yore pards, hightailed up here to cover yore coyote tracks. In four years yuh've made people think yuh're honest an' fine an'—"

"Hold it, Red!" Gregg wheedled. Sweat beaded his face. He broke then. His voice became a whine. "Forgit the past, Red. I'll do right by yuh. We'll go over to the line-shack an' yuh'll—yuh'll kill Bean. We'll take the gold, split it even. Then hightail it for Mexico."

It was a beautiful picture Big Gregg tried to paint. And while he was talking, a mile to the east a little man was kneeling at the side of his bunk, praying.

"Watch out for Gregg, God," he was whispering. "Get him there an' back safe. He's my pard."

In the heavy darkness that precedes the dawn, Lee Bean awoke with a start. Above the hammering of his heart he heard a sound outside. Leaping from the bunk he jerked on his pants and boots. An icy hand of fear clutched his heart. He bounded to the fireplace, jerked down a loaded six-gun.

He heard the sound more distinct now. It was the crunching of boot-heels in the snow! He reached the door. With a trembling hand he slid back the bolt. Then he jerked the door open.

A HUGE figure was looming out of the night toward him. Lee Bean shrilled:

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

"Hold it, Bean! It's me! Put down that gun, yuh damned fool!"

"Gregg!" Lee Bean cried shakily. "Gregg, what's wrong?"

Gregg tried to laugh as he stomped into the cabin and lit the lamp. He kicked off his snow-shoes. Lee Bean busied himself building a fire.

"Got as far as the Indian's hut," Gregg explained. "Goin' on was too much of a task on foot, Bean. I wrote a note to Mart, told him to hightail it into town an' file for us. Explained everything in writin' an' got the Indian to run the message in for us."

Lee Bean thought that was swell. He laughed and talked as he worked over the fire. He was mighty glad Gregg was back. Having Gregg with him gave him a feeling of security. He didn't see the fear, contempt, flood Gregg's shifty eyes. Gregg looked nervously toward the window. He wasn't listening to the little runt who called himself his pard. Outside the low wind moaned around the corner of the shack.

Once the fire was going, Lee Bean straightened. His thin face was flushed with excitement. He forgot to tell Gregg about the loss of his horse. He was saying something about getting breakfast when his words stopped. His eyes widened. He stood rigid, listening.

"What's the matter with *you*, Lee?" Gregg growled.

"Thought I heard something," Lee whispered tensely.

Gregg sneered. "Bein' alone fer a spell has got the best of yore nerves, Bean. That's water drippin' at the eaves. Startin' to thaw."

Lee Bean didn't move. The sound he'd heard wasn't from the thaw. Tides of disaster surged through him. His face paled. He wanted Gregg to get up and go outside and look around, but Gregg sat very still.

Then a sudden shrill cry of terror broke from Bean. Gregg came to his feet. Bean was pointing, yelling.

"The window, Gregg! Watch out!"

A gun crashed. Window-glass splintered. A flame of red hot pain stabbed through Bean's mind. Agony spurted through every muscle of his body. He tried

to shout, to warn Gregg, but no words would come. Swirling shadows engulfed him. He felt his knees give way.

He felt no pain when he struck the floor. Blood gushed from his forehead, staining the plank floor. His eyes closed, and for what seemed hellish hours of torture he lay there unable to move. Thoughts of himself dying didn't bother him now. Somehow he wasn't afraid to die. He only wanted to make sure that Big Gregg was safe.

"Gregg," he tried to call. "Gregg!"

He wondered why he didn't die. Through the awful din beating into his ears came the gibberish sound of voices. Gregg was saying something. Another man's voice answered him in harsh discord. What they were saying was meaningless to Bean. Then the sounds faded entirely.

Bean thought he was floating through fathomless space where it was dark. In his horrible nightmare of agony it seemed that black, churning waters were engulfing him. He was choking, strangling, gasping for breath, fighting to extricate himself from the tidal wave.

"Water!" he called very pitifully. "Water, Gregg!"

Then excruciating pain was hammering at Bean's head with sledgehammer blows. A sobbing groan escaped him. Dimly he became aware of a man stooping over him. He thought it was Gregg at first.

Bean's eyes opened wide. He stared up horror-struck into the bearded face of the red-haired man he'd seen at the window. Through a blurry haze Bean saw the man's face with shocking clarity.

"Yuh'll be all right," the man was muttering. "Lay still. One good turn deserves another, mister. Didn't recognize yuh at first. Hell, yuh're the little depitty what could have killed me the time I left the bank—"

Frantically, Bean lifted himself to his elbows. Blood streaked his face.

"Gregg!" he gasped dazedly.

Red Matson grinned sardonically.

"Why, he heard yuh yelpin' fer water an' he went to the spring to fetch yuh a drink. He'll be back in a minute. Then I'm goin' to let you go—an' *kill him!*"

Red Matson saying that did something to Bean. Deeper than any fear he had ever known was suddenly born a courage that bordered on madness. Thoughts of Big Gregg dying fired his veins with the strength of an insane man. With the wild cry of a mortally wounded beast he sprang to his feet, clawing at the killer's throat. Red Matson's gun exploded as he made a frenzied draw. He stiffened, cursing. He fought desperately to fling the little man away from him. The gun fell from his fist. He beat at the face of the little man who was choking the life out of him.

Bean felt his fingers sink deeper into the man's throat. With every ounce of his waning strength he held on with the tenacity of a wolf. His ears roared; the room swam about him. His breath came in hissing gulps. The killer's fist smashed into his face, but each blow became weaker.

**T**HEN Bean felt the weight of the man's body grow limp. Matson's body sagged and Bean fell on top of him. With the dull sound of their bodies striking the floor came a new sound from outside: the clatter of a cow-bell!

Bean heard that bell ringing. It sounded miles off at first. He groped to his hands and knees. Horror struck through the fog of his mind—an awful sickening realization of what had happened.

He reeled to his feet, lurched out the open door. Like a drunken man he headed for the spring, eyes stabbing the darkness. Almost to the spring he stopped, stared

dully at the gruesome sight before him.

"Gregg," he whispered hoarsely. "My God, Gregg, I killed yuh!"

Remorse, grief overwhelmed Bean. He walked slowly forward toward the trap that he had built to catch a bear. He made no sound, but stared dully at a sight that would forever haunt him.

The sapling stood almost straight now. The rope that stretched from it was taut. The tightened loop had caught Gregg about his boot-tops. His feet were in the air, his shoulder and head in a ghastly twist upon the snow-covered ground. When the trap had sprung it had smashed Gregg's head upon the frozen ground, broken his neck.

With his knife, Bean cut the rope that held Gregg's body. Bean stared uncomprehendingly at the spilled bucket of sacked gold nearby. He stooped, picked up the sacks of gold, carried them toward the shack. Behind him the cow-bell tinkled.

When he stepped into the shack he saw Red Matson still lying sprawled on the floor. The outlaw's eyes were open. His face was pale as the snow outside, pinched with pain. One of his hands held his stomach and blood seeped between his fingers.

"Never thought I'd shoot myself, Bean," he said weakly. "Yuh hit the barrel of my gun as it went off. The law — won't need worry about Red Matson — no more. Only wish I coulda finished Gregg."

"Gregg's dead," Bean said dully.

Lee Bean couldn't *sabe* the gladness that leaped into the outlaw's eyes. But he did understand what Matson told him. That hurt him more than the wound in his head.

Matson's eyes closed. Bean thought the outlaw was dead. He turned, and rushed outside. Out at the shed he dragged forth a light sled.

FOLKS in Rincon still talk about the morning Sheriff Bud Goodloe, old Mart Lambert and a group of men on horseback came upon little Lee Bean a mile from town.

They met Lee Bean trudging out of the hills toward them. About his head was a blood-soaked bandanna. His eyes were like sunken red pits of fire—the eyes of a gent who has been through hell and lived to come out a *man!* Behind him was a small sled, and upon it was the blanket-wrapped body of big Gregg Kilborne. On the sled beside the body were four sacks of nugget gold.

Lee Bean was reeling when the horsebackers reached him.

"Gregg's dead," Bean told those men. "Red Matson is back at the line-shack—dead. In the fight I was wounded. Gregg went to fetch me a drink. He stumbled into a trap I had set for a bear."

Lee Bean hardly knew why he told those men that. He saw the amazement, then the deep hurt that comes with the loss of a great man.

Later that day most of the town turned out to help Lee Bean bury his pard in Boot Hill. Those kindly folks knew that it was a terrible blow to Lee Bean to lose his devoted pard. So they tried to console him by saying that they'd erect a tombstone over Gregg's grave—the finest in the country. And when they began wondering what would be fitting as an epitaph, Bean quietly said:

"Jest put on the tombstone, 'Boot Hill—it catches the good an' catches the bad.' Where's Mart Lambert?"

Everybody began looking around. They hadn't missed old Mart until now. In the excitement of overtaking Lee Bean they hadn't seen Mart ride on deeper into the hills. But Mart Lambert didn't show up in town until the next day, and then he was mighty quiet.

And so it was that old Mart Lambert and little Lee Bean became partners in a gold mine that made them both wealthy. Folks think a lot of Lee Bean, but mostly it's big Gregg Kilborne they still talk about. All except old Mart Lambert, who is Lee Bean's closest friend.

Old Mart knows the truth of what happened that night, for he was the first to reach the line-shack. There was still a spark of life in Red Matson. And as old Mart lifted the outlaw's head into his arms the whispered truth came out.