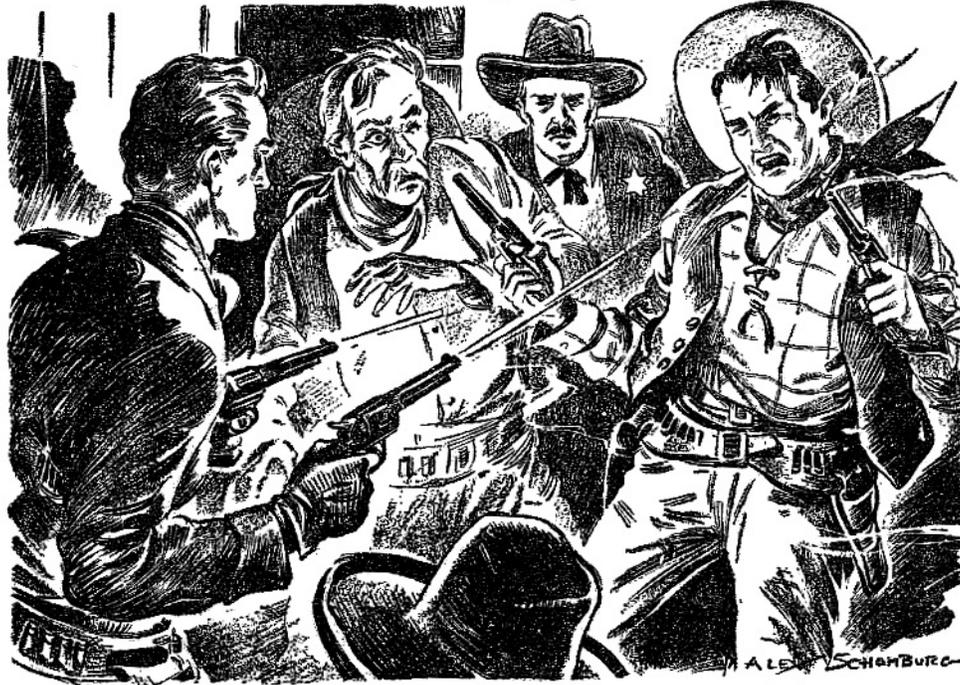


Littlejohn Detours on the Owl-hoot Trail When Law and Order
Bust Into a Stampede!



Through the blast of .45s a scream of mortal terror knifed thinly

LONG SAM PAYS WITH LEAD

By LEE BOND

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THE little old gent with only one eye did not look like the thief they were calling him. That fact kept sticking in the mind of Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw, as he stood there in the black night outside the sheriff's office.

With two thousand dollars scalp money awaiting the man or men who could capture him dead or alive, Long Sam reckoned that he was worse than a fool for lingering around this combination jail house and sheriff's office. Wolfing into town for needed supplies, he had been passing along behind the building when he heard the shrill

cries of that old man they were grilling in there. Something in the squeaky voice had caused the outlaw to turn along the side of the building, and approach the square of yellow light that outlined the open window beside which he now stood.

Littlejohn was an unusually tall fellow, with a bony face that was slashed across by an ample mouth, and set with a pair of eyes that were the color of smoke. Always dressed in somber black from boots to John B, the gaunt outlaw would have been hard to see as he stood pressed to the gritty wall of the adobe building. He had removed his big

Stetson, but was careful to keep his yellow-thatched head and face out of the window's glow.

The outlaw's smoky eyes were raking the room that served as the sheriff's office, studying the three hard-case hellions who stood over the cringing old man, with his one eye and his quivering chin. A lanky, horse-faced fellow with a star on his vest front slapped the one-eyed oldster across the mouth now, and kicked at the scrawny old fellow when he fell from chair to floor.

"Get up from there, Whit Thornton, an' quit yore damned lyin'," the badge-toter snarled. "Yuh picked the lock on that strong-box an' taked out the ten thousand cash that Duff Grundy, here, was sendin' up to his branch bank at Timber Creek."

A dozen or more white-faced men who were pressed against the far wall of the stuffy little office muttered protestingly when the lawman kicked old Whit Thornton again. But no one offered to do anything, and suddenly Long Sam Littlejohn was humming very softly under his breath. The tune he breathed was a dismal range dirge, and when the gaunt, smoky-eyed outlaw hummed that doleful tune it was an odds-on bet that his fighting temper was aroused.

About Long Sam's flat middle were black cartridge belts, which supported a pair of low-slung holsters that bulged with black-butted .45s.

Long Sam tucked his folded, dusty Stetson under one arm, and let bony hands drop to the butts of those holstered guns now.

"This is none of my butt-in," he thought angrily. "But damned if I like the way that badge-totin' son is bootin' that old feller. On top of that, the old gent don't look like a man that'd rob anybody."

His sharp ears caught the next accusation. "Shore, Thornton, yuh picked the lock on the strong-box, an' took my money," a big, deep-jowled hombre rumbled.

"There's no other way it coulda got out of the strong-box between here an' Timber Creek town. Talk up, yuh old heller, or I'll make yuh wish yuh'd never seen this state of Texas."

"I didn't take the money!" Whit Thornton shrilled. "Damnation, men, yuh know I ain't a thief! Ain't I drove the stage out of here for two years now without losin' a dime? Ain't I allus been a law-abidin' citizen?"

THORNTON came shakily to his feet, a little, shriveled-up oldster who turned his one eye pleadingly from face to face. But the three men who stood over him with scowls puckering their brows only glared at his plea for understanding.

That horse faced hellion with the star on his vest would, Long Sam Littlejohn knew, be Sheriff Lafe Ollard. It was whispered along the owl-hoot trails Long Sam rode that a wanted man could hole up in Lafe Ollard's county and not be bothered, so long as said wanted man did not balk at doing a few chores for Duff Grundy, who owned practically the whole works.

Littlejohn's eyes were boring Duff Grundy now, studying the deep-jowled face with its bulging, red-veined black eyes and sneering line of thick-lipped mouth. Hair as black and coarse as a pony's mane showed beneath Grundy's shoved-back Stetson, and there was something rock-hard and threatening about the big, raw-boned man who bossed this county. Duff Grundy's Walking R cattle numbered well up into the thousands, and it was no secret that he had marched his small army of gun-hung riders against more than one neighbor whose range he wanted.

Long Sam Littlejohn reviewed those things he had heard of the county's overlord as he stood surveying the man. Littlejohn's smoky eyes were slits now, and he was humming again that mournful tune as he

watched the play there in the sheriff's office.

The third man who stood threateningly above Whit Thornton was a popeyed, moon-faced young fellow, with Duff Grundy's deep jowls and broad, thick mouth. Only the younger man's thick lips were wet and soft, and he looked as flabby as a slop-fed hog. That moon-faced, pot-bellied youngster would, Long Sam guessed, be Ed Grundy, Duff Grundy's swell-headed son.

"It's plain that the old heller is lyin', Pa," young Grundy yammered now. "The ten thousand was in the strongbox when it left our bank here. We both know that an' so does Lafe. He seen us lock the money in the strongbox. But the money was gone when it got to our other bank up to Timber Creek. So old Whit picked the lock an' stole the money!"

Ed Grundy wore loud clothes, kept his coarse shock of black hair smeared with perfumed oil, and fancied himself a lady killer. He strutted and bragged and bullied his way along, soundly hated by most people, but unmolested because it was dangerous to cross any kin of Duff Grundy.

"Yuh'll spend the rest of yore life in the pen, Thornton, unless yuh dig up that ten thousand dollars damned quick," Lafe Ollard rapped. "I'll give yuh one more chance to come clean, yuh droolin' old tramp. Unless yuh admit—"

Long Sam Littlejohn gaped at the sudden change which came over Thornton. The man's thin shoulders straightened, his lined face twisted into a mask of bitterness. Thornton's one eye—the right one—lost its mute plea for fairness and understanding. The grizzled head was erect now, and Whit Thornton's bleeding lips curled as he looked levelly up into the faces of the Grundys.

"Well, Duff. I can't say that you an' this whelp of yore'n ain't warned me often enough," the old fellow droned. "Ever since the night three years ago when you an' yore hellions raided my Ladder H, an' tortured

me until I signed my spread over to yuh, lock, stock and barrel, yuh've told me to quit the country.

"Remember that raid, Duff? You and yore bunch strapped me to my own bunk. Yuh poked the pine splinter in behind the ball of my left eye, an' let this kid of yore'n light the protrudin' end of the splinter. I ain't never been proud of the fact that I screamed an' begged, that night, Duff. It was sort of cowardly, I reckon. But when that splinter burned down to my bulgin' eyeball—"

DUFF GRUNDY swung a maul of a fist that smashed the old man to the floor. Ed Grundy, moon face white and twisted, kicked at the fallen man's head and belly. Sheriff Lafe Ollard cursed in a frenzy of alarm, rolled his eyes toward the men against the opposite wall. But before either of the Grundys or the badge-toter could speak, old Whit Thornton was on his feet again, blood pouring from his boot-marked face, but the fires of a long-throttled rage blazing from his one good eye.

"Button yore damned lip, Thornton," Duff Grundy choked. "If yuh blat any more I'll—"

"Yuh'll kill me, shore," the oldster squalled. "But kill an' be damned! Them men agin the wall yonder are hearin' me. They're hearin' how this eye of mine come to be missin', an' how my Ladder H happened to be transferred over to you. The torture you sons dealt me that night made me sick in the brains for a long time. I got this stage-drivin' job, an' managed to make a livin'. I was ashamed to tell any man that I was weak enough to let yuh take my ranch an' stock like yuh done, Grundy.

"But in the back of that snake's brain of yore'n, yuh've allus feared I would talk some day. So you an' this pet sheriff of yore'n an' this yaller son yuh set so much store by framed me. Yuh aim to send me to the pen, eh? There was no money in that

strong-box when it left here today. But yore heel dogs will sit on a jury an' send me to—"

"I'm sendin' yuh to hell," Ed Grundy squalled.

He dug at holstered guns with fat hands, while his bulging dark eyes rolled quickly aside to make sure that his father and the sheriff they owned were ready to back his play.

Ed Grundy's wet lips split in an exultant grin when he saw Whit Thornton crouch in helpless dread. Ed Grundy's fancy guns whisked from silver-studded holsters, and the room throbbed to a double report.

Through the blast of .45s a scream of mortal terror knifed thinly, and a man fell heavily to the floor. But it was not the scrawny body of old Whit Thornton that whacked that floor. Old Whit still stood with grizzled jaw sagging, his one eye as round as a saucer.

Duff Grundy looked as if a mule had kicked him in the belly, driving the breath from him, rendering him helpless to move or speak. Sheriff Lafe Ollard stood with guns half drawn, his horse-face a study in amazed disbelief. For Ed Grundy lay on the floor, slobbering curses of terror while his soft fat hands clawed at blood-spurting lumps of bullet-torn flesh that had been his big ears.

For a few breathless seconds there was no word spoken, as dumfounded men stared at the bleeding man on the floor and tried to figure out what had happened. Then a softly hummed tune that was a dismal thing drifted into the room, and heads jerked toward the window. Long Sam Littlejohn was framed in that square, his thin face a devil's mask behind leveled guns.

"Duff Grundy, you or that snake-blooded thing with the star on its vest will get gut-shot if yuh move a muscle," the gaunt outlaw droned. "You, Whit Thornton, sidle out the door, yonder, an' step around here where I am. I reckon them citizens agin the far wall, there, won't try to stop yuh. Not after they

heard yore story of how yuh lost that eye an' lost yore ranch. Come on, Thornton. I'll drill the first mother's son that lifts a hand to stop yuh."

"And I'll drill you, tall boy, if yuh don't freeze loose from them guns," a harsh voice rasped in Long Sam's ear.

A gun bored the outlaw's spine, and to his ears came the dull sound of hammer-dogs clicking as a gun was cocked.

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN knew the voice that lashed at him from the darkness at his back. It was the voice of Joe Fry, Deputy U. S. Marshal, who stuck to the gaunt outlaw's trail like a bulldog.

Joe Fry wore store clothes, a rusty derby hat and button shoes. He was a short, thick-chested little fellow, with a steel-trap of a mouth, glinting gray eyes and a mastiff's chin. With a frayed butt of cigar always jutting from one corner of his hard mouth and his store clothes, Joe Fry looked like a drummer. But looks were deceiving in that little deputy's case, for he was one of the most deadly manhunters in the Southwest.

Long Sam Littlejohn knew that his life hung by a mighty narrow thread now. Unless he dropped the guns he held, Joe Fry might pull trigger. And if he did drop those guns inside the window, Duff Grundy and that horse-faced sheriff in there would kill him just as sure as powder burns.

"I said let the hardware fall, tall boy," Joe Fry barked. "Jar loose from them cutters, or I'll knock yuh loose."

"Easy, runt," Long Sam husked softly. "Can't yuh see into the room from where yuh stand? If I drop these guns I'll get shot."

"Say, what's into that noose-dodgin' hellion?" Duff Grundy bellowed. "He acts like somebody was—"

Long Sam Littlejohn heard no more. It seemed that the whole top of his head exploded. The room before him whirled and stood crazily on one end, and the men in it

were leaping and lunging in alarm. But two of those men held death-spitting guns, and the gaunt outlaw recognized those two dimly as Duff Grundy and Sheriff Lafe Ollard. Then things went blackish blotting out the lights and sounds. It seemed only a second or two, however, until lukewarm water was splashing into Long Sam's face.

The outlaw spluttered, groaned when pain seared through his head. He rolled to one elbow, blinked dazedly into the mellow glow of lamplight. Then Long Sam was on his feet, cursing through twisted lips as his smoky eyes raked four solid walls. Two of the walls were cut by small, heavily barred windows. A third wall was broken by a door of iron bars through which the sheriff's littered office showed.

"Jail!" the outlaw rasped, and ran trembling fingers across the lump which hung like a goose egg to the back of his head.

"Shore this is a jail house!" a voice rapped. "What the hell do yuh think it is, the bridal suite in some swank hotel? Yuh crane-legged son of a lizard, this mess is all yore own doin's."

Littlejohn turned, his gaunt face stiff. Deputy Joe Fry stood before him, a tin dipper dangling from one pudgy hand. Fry's blue coat was ripped along one shoulder seam, his face was a mass of cuts and bruises, and one glittering eye was almost closed by angry red flesh that would turn purple-black before many more hours.

"What the hell!" Long Sam gaped, before his mind began clicking.

His stony face thawed under a sour grin, and his smoky eyes lost their glitter of anger. Joe Fry cursed him through bruised lips, and flung the battered tin dipper at him. Long Sam ducked, and the dipper wrenched tinny music from the bars of the door.

"So yuh stuck yore thick head into a wolf's den, eh, badge man?" the outlaw chuckled. "Yuh figgered to add to yore

manhuntin' rep by tossin' me to the hangman. But instead, yuh showed yore hand to a bunch that can't afford to have an honest badge-toter sniffin' their secrets. So yuh're in jail, an' yore precious rep as a bounty-huntin' badge-toter won't get yuh a damned thing. Know what'll happen to yuh now, Fry?"

JOE FRY'S battered face was purple and his steely eyes burned wildly as he glared at the outlaw.

"Crow, yuh long-legged son," he choked. "But I've got yuh behind bars, even if I am here with yuh! An' before I'm through with Grundy an' that damned sheriff, they'll wish they'd never been born! When they check up on my credentials an' find out that I was not lyin' about who I am, things will begin to happen. I'll— Stop hummin' that damned funeral tune!"

Long Sam's throbbing head had canted to one side, and suddenly the mournful tune was humming through his strong teeth. Gone now was his humor, and his gaunt cheeks whitened as he listened, his humming flowing and ebbing.

"Where's old Whit Thornton?" the outlaw demanded so sharply that the battered lawman flinched.

"Yonder," Fry snapped, and jerked a hand toward a dim corner.

Long Sam crossed to a pile of filthy quilts, where old Whit Thornton lay smiling feebly up at him. Blood oozed from a gash across the oldster's withered left cheek, and Thornton looked as if a herd of cattle had stampeded over him.

"Thanks, son, for tryin' to help me," the old fellow said wearily. "That damned bunch nigh beat me to death after they taken this cocky little badge man's gun away from him. If he hadn't horned in, me an' you would have made a clean getaway, Littlejohn. But thanks, boy, for buyin' chips in the game. It helps to know that a stove-up

old coot like me could find at least one real friend, anyhow.”

“Cocky, am I?” Fry began. “Yuh old—”

Long Sam whirled, and something in his bony face shut the officer’s yapping mouth.

“Listen, yuh fat-headed little fool,” the outlaw rasped. “This is trail’s end for the three of us, unless we can do some tall figgerin’ an’ some taller actin’. Forget that yuh’re God’s gift to the badge-toters for a few minutes, Fry, an’ see if yuh can’t be a human bein’ for once. Or has it soaked through that thick head of yore’n yet that Duff Grundy an’ his sheriff aim to see that yuh never leave this Stampede town alive?”

“Say, are yuh crazy?” the officer snorted. “Grundy an’ his bunch wouldn’t dare do anything to me. Hell, Littlejohn, I credited yuh with havin’ at least a little sense.”

Littlejohn snorted. “So Grundy an’ his bunch wouldn’t dare harm Uncle Sam’s angel child, eh?” the outlaw sneered. “Well, I could be wrong, I reckon. But if that noise I hear out in the streets ain’t the snarl of a lynch-rage bein’ fanned with Forty-rod, then I’ll eat that dented derby yuh’ve got perched on yore noggin. Or had yuh figgered that hell-squallin’ out there was just Stampede’s way of welcomin’ the great manhunter, Joe Fry, to their midst?”

The deputy was stung to the quick by Long Sam’s lashing remarks, and a blistering reply boiled up in his throat. But the retort died before Fry could utter it, and he stood with derbied head cocked, hard eyes widening slowly as he listened to the muted roar of voices that drifted through the small barred windows.

FRY hurried to one of the windows, tiptoeing to peer out upon the night-shrouded streets. He could see men moving back and forth through swaths of lamplight that spilled from windows. But the town’s one long street was mostly in shadow, and from the depths of those shadows the ugly

mutter of voices was growing steadily.

“By hell, long feller, there is somethin’ brewin’ out there,” the deputy growled, turning back from the window. “But it’s likely yore long neck that they aim to give a stretchin’. Grundy an’ the sheriff wouldn’t dare polish me off! Killin’ off Gov’ment officers is bad business, an’ Duff Grundy knows it.”

“Yuh make me sick,” Littlejohn grunted disgustedly. “Ain’t yuh got sense enough to see that Grundy an’ his sheriff would swear that you was only bein’ held in jail until yore identification could be made positive? That a drunken mob of masked men busted into the jail an’ hung yuh along with me an’ Thornton?”

“Yore crazy!” Fry clipped. “That sounds like a mob formin’, I’ll admit. An’ they likely have ideas of stretchin’ yore neck for yuh. But as for me, they’ll have better sense than to do me in. I tell yuh!”

“Guess agin, Fry,” old Whit Thornton called grimly. “While you an’ Littlejohn was both out cold, Duff Grundy an’ Sheriff Lafe Ollard come right here into this cell, an’ beat the daylights outa me. An’ while they was beatin’ me up, they told me plain an’ forceful that a hang noose would stretch the necks of us three before mornin’. Duff Grundy an’ his hired tramps are scared green, Fry, because yuh made that crack about tellin’ the Rangers to look into things here.”

“What the hell if I did say I aimed to have the Texas Rangers come curry this town of Duff Grundy’s!” Fry snapped. “Grundy an’ his sheriff had me sore, the way they took my gun an’ papers an’ called me a liar when I told ‘em who I was.”

“Yuh addle-witted wart!” Long Sam choked. “Grundy knows the Rangers would set up an’ take notice if a Deputy U. S. Marshal mentioned that this town needed a lookin’ over. Yore neck will crack, Fry, unless we can get out of this coop, poco

pronto.”

“That’s the town’s mess of saloon bums an’ saddle tramps doin’ the hollerin’ out there now,” Whit Thornton explained. “But Grundy sent to the Walkin’ R for Frosty Neal, his foreman, an’ the rest of his gun-hung hellions. When that bunch hits town, gents, we’ll get turned into cottonwood berries mighty sudden.”

“I heard Grundy an’ the sheriff accusin’ yuh of stealin’ ten thousand dollars out of a strong-box off the stage yuh drive, Thornton,” Joe Fry snapped. “I can’t see why a big rancher like Duff Grundy would be botherin’ with small potatoes like you unless there’s somethin’ to the charge.”

“I ain’t no thief, Fry,” the old fellow clipped, and sat up. “Yuh see this puckered socket here on my face that used to hold an eye?”

Thornton’s reedy voice lifted to a shrill pitch, and he was suddenly retelling his story of stark horror.

Long Sam Littlejohn’s case-hardened nerves crawled again, and he sleeved sticky sweat from his gaunt face. Joe Fry looked a little green around the gills, and was cussing in a dull monotone.

“I fainted about the time my eyeball busted from the flame of that splinter,” Thornton finished. “But when I woke up, Grundy an’ his bunch was standin’ over me yet, an’ they had another pine sliver ready. They aimed to poke that splinter behind this one eye I’ve got left an’ light it—unless I signed away the ranch I’d worked my head off to build. Maybe I’m yaller, Fry, for I signed away my spread, lock, stock an’ barrel.”

THE oldster was bitterly indignant. “But I ain’t no damned thief like Duff Grundy claims! He framed me, him an’ that son of his. Lafe Ollard is in on the frame, too. They want to get rid of me, fearin’ that some day I might tell the Rangers what I’ve

told you.”

“Lordy,” Joe Fry croaked. “I—I didn’t know civilized humans could get low enough to do—”

“Somebody is openin’ the front door up yonder at the sheriff’s office,” Long Sam cut in coldly. “Mebbe that’s the hang-noose committee comin’ to decorate our necks with hemp, Fry.”

Only one figure came through the door and into the sheriff’s office. And as Long Sam Littlejohn pressed close to the iron-barred door and studied that one man, he softly hummed the dismal tune which meant that red hell coursed through his veins.

The man who had come into the sheriff’s office was Ed Grundy, pampered son of Duff Grundy. Ed Grundy’s ears were hidden under mounds of carefully taped bandage, and his moon-face was flushed from drink and leering as he slogged across the room to stand facing Long Sam. Ed Grundy produced a key-ring, which held a single, huge iron key that would fit the lock of the iron-barred door before Long Sam.

“The sheriff has been took prisoner,” young Grundy leered. “He’s bogged down, where he can’t bother nobody for a spell. An’ pa says I can run the show from now on, Littlejohn. Know what I’m goin’ to do to yuh for—for blastin’ my ears half off with slugs?”

“Young feller, yuh’ll open this door an’ let me out of here, if yuh’re smart,” Joe Fry began hotly. “I’ll see that you an’ yore daddy both do a hell of a long stretch in the pen if yuh don’t—”

Long Sam Littlejohn half turned, and his left hand seemed to flip up almost lazily. Yet the knotty fist of the outlaw popped like the smack of a flat board against Fry’s chin, and the stubby deputy swapped ends in mid-air, landed on his ear, and came to a shuddering halt nearly ten feet from where he had been standing. Joe Fry was out cold, and would not horn into anything else for a few

minutes, at least.

Long Sam turned back to the barred door, and his pulse lifted to a quick beat when he saw Ed Grundy sidle forward, peering through the bars at the fallen officer.

"Say, yuh pack a wallop, yuh long-legged son," the pudgy youth sneered. "But I'll take that out of yuh before I give the word to stretch yore neck. I'm goin' to slide pine splinters behind yore eyeballs, Littlejohn, an' set them splinters on fire. Yuh'll holler to beat hell before them eyeballs explode. I'll learn yuh better than to get cocky with me!"

Long Sam Littlejohn let his jaw sag, and stepped back from the iron bars, gulping as if frightened half out of his wits.

"Yuh—yuh ain't tough enough to do that, button," he stammered. "Hell, it'd take a tough hand to do a trick like that. Yuh're jest talkin', that's all."

"Talkin', am I?" Ed Grundy squalled. "So I ain't a tough hand, huh? I'll make yuh eat them words, yuh damned noose-dodger. Jest wait until them splinters—*Hey, leggo me, yuh—*"

Long Sam Littlejohn seemed too far away from the bars to be plotting any such move as he made. But suddenly one of those very long arms of his shot out with the speed of a rattler's strike. Littlejohn's hand darted between the bars, and fingers that were like slim strips of whalebone fastened over Ed Grundy's fat throat. The outlaw's other hand shot through the bars now, and plucked a six-gun from the torturing youth's holster.

LONG SAM had figured that Ed Grundy would get plenty sore if anyone openly doubted his "toughness." And he had figured on young Grundy doing just what he had—pressing close to the bars while he mouthed his cowardly threats.

The gaunt outlaw stuck the captured gun in his own waistband, then reached across Ed Grundy's heaving belly and snatched the

young tough's other weapon. Long Sam stepped back then, and jerked violently.

Grundy's purpling face smashed the bars solidly. Blood spurted, a wheezing moan squeezed through Grundy's constricted throat. Long Sam yanked the coward's bleeding face against the bars again, then chuckled coldly when Ed Grundy's fat legs buckled. He let the pampered young devil fall, then stooped, reached through and retrieved the ring with its one big key.

"Hell-a-hoppin'!" old Whit Thornton wheezed in Long Sam's ear. "Son, yuh're the kind of a gent I'd hate like sin to have for an enemy. Get that door open, boy, an' let's you an' me skedaddle before that hang crowd shows up."

Long Sam had the door open now. He and old Whit jumped outside, but the outlaw stopped, lifted Ed Grundy and slung him none too gently into the cell. Then the door clanged, the lock's tumblers groaned, and Long Sam turned away, humming his doleful battle song as he strode out into the sheriff's office. He handed the key and ring to old Whit, who had armed himself with a Winchester from a gunrack.

"I'm takin' this gun jest in case we're followed when we try to quit town," the oldster grunted. "I've took all I aim to off them Walkin' R whelps. If they chase me—What yuh givin' me this key for?"

"Take the key, an' drift out somewhere into the shadows," Long Sam droned. "But first, tell me where Duff Grundy an' his pet sheriff would mebbe be hangin' out."

"They'll be in the back room at the Prairie Palace," Thornton chattered. "Grundy owns the Palace, which is the crookedest damned gamblin' outfit this side of anywhere. But don't be fool enough to go around there huntin' them two. The place is full of Grundy's hired heel dogs."

"Me?" Long Sam snorted. "I come into town for supplies. I'll—er—wind up my business right quick, an' be on my way

yonderly. Sorta keep that key hid for a few hours, Thornton. Don't let Joe Fry out any too soon. The way I ribbed him in there, he was mad enough. But crackin' him on the jaw to keep him from spoilin' my chances of gettin' hold of Ed Grundy shore will have that badge man faunchin'.

"Joe is a good feller, even if he does pack a badge. He'll see yuh through this mess until yuh get yore spread back. Well—adios, old-timer. An' good luck. With that fat button of Grundy's in jail, yuh've as good as got yore ranch back. Ed Grundy will talk plenty when he finds his tail in a crack."

"Adios, son," old Whit gulped. "I—I sorta hoped we could ride out together. But—but I reckon a stove-up old goat like me couldn't keep yore pace."

Long Sam had found his own shell-studded belts and holstered guns in the sheriff's desk drawer. He buckled them on, settled the holsters, then lifted his black Stetson from a wall peg. He stalked quickly out the door, pretending not to have heard what old Whit said about maybe riding out with him. But as he stepped into the night, the outlaw glanced back, and caught a sort of hopeless, beaten look on the oldster's face.

A SPASM of pain twitched at the outlaw's face. "Damn' Grundy an' his whole breed," he gritted as his long legs bore him into the night. "Breakin' a man the way old Whit was broke shore calls for some kind of payment in kind. But there's still fight in old Whit, if anybody just sided him a mite. I didn't dast tell the old rooster what I'm up to. Might get him killed, an' he's had hell enough."

And Long Sam Littlejohn was humming that mournful music through big teeth as he moved away from the street and into the littered area behind Stampede's business buildings. He had spotted the Prairie Palace as he rode into town just at dusk, and his long legs carried him unerringly to the rear

of the establishment now.

His humming dropped to a low moan of sound as he stepped up into the open back door. Beyond, he could see a bar packed three deep, and a scatteration of gambling layouts across the room from the bar. But this part of the Prairie Palace was shadowed by a balcony, and Long Sam's smoky eyes searched the wall to his left until he found a door.

He halted before the portal, sucked a lungful of air, and tested the guns at his thighs for holster ease. From beyond the portal came the thin tinkle of glasses, and a muted, yet somehow sinister note of laughter. Long Sam grasped the doorknob, turned it, flung into the room and closed the door behind him all in one burst of movement. And he was humming louder now, as he stood with smoky eyes slitted.

His lips grinned at the three astounded men who surged up from a green-topped table, whiskey glasses spilling from their palsied hands. One of the men was a chunky, black-whiskered tough whom Long Sam had never seen before. The other two were Duff Grundy and Lafe Ollard.

"By heaven, it's Littlejohn!" Duff Grundy choked. "How—how—"

"It's settlement time, buckaroos," Long Sam droned. "How I got out ain't important. All that matters is that I'm here. That swell-headed son of yore'n is in jail, Grundy. He's yellow, and he'll talk when the Rangers—"

The black-whiskered gent went for double belt guns. And that hombre was fast! Long Sam's own hands dipped in a swooping motion, but the whiskered hombre beat him to the smoke. Long Sam felt the bitter pain of lead tearing the flesh along his left flank as his own guns tilted clear.

The outlaw lifted and dropped gun-hammers in a rhythm of perfect timing, and Whiskers coughed red spray as his chunky legs failed him. But Long Sam had no time to watch the whiskey gunman fall, for Duff

Grundy and the horse-faced sheriff had unlimbered their own hardware now.

A bullet snicked at the crimson neckerchief about Long Sam's throat, and another tore a chunk from the brim of his hat. His long body swiveled around until his hip-high guns were spurting red death across the table top, and the outlaw was humming his mournful song as the .45s bounced against his palms.

Blood washed his face from a cut cheek, and his humming wavered, marred by a grunt of pain when a bullet burned along one side of his neck. But in those brief red seconds since Littlejohn had swiveled his guns to slant powder-flame across the table, Sheriff Lafe Ollard had screamed in mortal agony, and was wilting down through the pall of powder gasses, bloody fingers digging at a spouting wound in his leathery throat. And now Long Sam's twin guns sought Duff Grundy's huge body like socketless eyes magnetically drawn to the big target.

DUFF GRUNDY was coming past the end of the table, squalling curses in a frenzy of fear and rage. He was rushing in for a sure shot, guns spraying red hell as his big body hurtled across the roaring room. But suddenly that big body seemed to strike some invisible barrier, and Duff Grundy stood for a long moment, his great hulk shuddering, while the color ran down from his broad face. His lips flapped open, and from the depths of his bullet-smashed lungs came a last, profane yowl of protest before his knees bent, and his lifeless body jarred the flooring.

Long Sam's humming lifted, then pinched off as his bony fingers flew to the task of reloading hot guns. Out yonder beyond the door voices were making a bedlam of sound, and feet were rushing closer along the floor.

"Duff Grundy's heel dogs," the outlaw gritted, and hurtled across the room. But as he flung the door open a rifle bellowed from farther back, and a man's shrill wail of pain wiped out all other sounds.

"Stand yore hands, yuh damned boot-lickers!" a shrill voice ordered. "One more peep from any one of you card sharps, an' I'll split somebody's belly with a rifle ball."

Long Sam stepped through into the shadowy space beneath the hanging balcony, and his thin face stretched into a cold grin as he hefted his still warm sixes. Standing there near the door was old Whit Thornton, his one good eye flaming hotly over the barrel of a leveled rifle. Up yonder where the shadow of the balcony began, a group of pasty faced tin horns stood at bay, one of their number wallowing on the floor, cursing the agony of a bullet-broken gun arm.

"I should have knowed what yuh was up to, son," old Whit greeted Long Sam. "Dang me! I should have knowed a fightin' fool like you would come scalp-huntin' after Duff Grundy. Yuh—get him?"

"Duff Grundy an' his pet sheriff won't bother no one agin," the outlaw grunted. "An' now, old-timer, if yuh'll keep them card sharps covered, I'll collect their hardware an' hit a lope yonderly."

"Yuh don't need to bother, Littlejohn," a gruff voice sang from the room behind the scared gamblers. "Me an' a few more honest citizens have been tryin' to figger ways an' means of bustin Grundy an' his gang since we heard Whit's story of his missin' eye tonight. But it looks, Littlejohn, like yuh've done the bustin' for us. Which, young feller, is somethin' this country is beholdin' to yuh for."

Long Sam grunted. "Looks like the shindig is over, Whit, so I'll mosey along," he said. "Got me a few wounds to look after, too. An' I wish yuh'd do me a favor, old-timer."

“Favor?” old Whit gulped. “Yuh give me a new lease on life, an’ hand my ranch back to me. Then yuh ask about me doin’ yuh a favor like mebbe it was somethin’ I’d balk at. They ain’t nothin’, son, that I wouldn’t do for yuh just so long as I could do it!”

“*Gracias*,” the outlaw muttered. “All I want, Thornton, is for yuh to—er—delay findin’ the key to the jail house where Joe Fry is roostin’ for, say, two-three hours. If I get that much of a start, I reckon I can keep ahead of that runt a spell.”

OLD Whit grinned hugely. “Jail key? Hell, now, I went an’ lost the thing, Littlejohn. It’ll take me until this time tomorrer, at least to remember that I hid the key under the rain barrel behind Jordan’s store. An’ while I’m doin’ the rememberin’, I’ll be squattin’ there in the sheriff’s office with this Winchester, to sorta discourage

anybody from usin’ a hacksaw on them bars.”

“A long start ahead of Joe Fry won’t make me a bit mad,” the outlaw chuckled. “Adios, old-timer. When that son of Grundy’s finds out what’s happened, he’ll give up head like a roped dogie. Yuh’ll get yore spread back, and—”

“And the Ladder H is yore home any time yuh’ll come an’ light,” old Whit finished throatily. “So long, son. Happy trails. An’ a million thanks for hornin’ into this deal an’ givin’ a stove-up old cuss like me a hand. Me an’ the honest element in this town will finish up the chore by gunnin’ the pants off Grundy’s Walkin’ R hellers when they hit town.”

“Then I reckon I’ll ride,” Long Sam said. “My Sleeper hoss is waitin’ yonder side of town, an’ I’d better shove country behind me before Joe Fry gets out of that coop.”