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LONG SAM MAKES A DEAL

By LEE BOND

Outlaw Long Sam Littlejohn takes on the job of cleaning two-gun bandits out of the quiet Border town of Firefly!

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN moved with the wariness of a bullet-stung lobo as he approached Firefly's main drag. The newly born Texas night was as black as the inside of a tar barrel; yet a silvery smudge in the east gave notice that the full moon would soon be up.

Littlejohn's thin brows formed a hard knot of worry above smoke-colored eyes that watched Firefly's street alertly. He

ghosted between two buildings, stopped finally where he could look out upon the light-blotched street that stretched away to the right and to the left.

He waited there, alert and scowling, a gaunt, unusually tall man. Yet anyone passing along the scarred boardwalk would not be apt to see him, for Long Sam Littlejohn was clad in jetty black from boots to flat-crowned Stetson. But there was no one moving along this boardwalk

before him, nor the one across the wide, rutted street. And suddenly Littlejohn knew why he had grown tense and uneasy as he slipped into the town.

Lamplight shone from most of the buildings, making yellow pools that reached across the walks and out into the dusty street. Yet there was no sound of booted feet upon those walks, no slapping of doors to echo along the street, no sound of men talking and laughing as there should have been. Nor was there a horse or rig of any kind to be seen along the street. Except for the lighted windows, Firefly had all the earmarks of a completely deserted town.

"Queer as a seven-dollar bill!" Littlejohn muttered, and moved in close to a gritty adobe wall.

He pulled the black Stetson off his head, stood combing long fingers through a mop of thick hair that was the color of frayed-out rope.

OUTLAWED, with a cash reward posted for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn had known that he was taking a dangerous gamble when he came to Firefly. This was Sheriff Alf Neal's town, and Neal hated outlaws with a purple passion. Littlejohn had always given Firefly a wide berth, because there was more than just talk behind Sheriff Neal's rep for bandit-busting.

Littlejohn had risked coming to Firefly tonight only because there was a bullet cut across his left shortribs that had maybe gone a little too long without treatment. He wanted it looked after before he swam his Sleeper horse across the Rio Grande a quarter-mile or so south of town. Settlements were few and far between over there in Mexico, and a man with a day-old bullet cut in his hide ought to have something to help heal up the wound before he holed up.

But there was something plenty wrong here in this sprawling little river town. Long Sam figured maybe he would be smart to forget about trying to find a sawbones and just drift quietly on.

Somewhere not too far behind him was Joe Fry, Deputy U. S. Marshal, who worked out of Austin. Fry had sighted him just at daybreak that morning, and had emptied a .30-.30 carbine at him as the outlaw had scuttled for cover.

One of Fry's slugs had laid Long Sam's hide open plumb down to the rib bones. Trickling sweat and the jarring pound of his big, ugly roan's day-long galloping and running and trotting had caused that open cut to deal the gaunt outlaw merry hallelujah.

But Long Sam was not so sure, now, that he would stick around long enough to locate the sawbones. The ghostly silence that gripped Firefly, and the fact that every horse had been taken off the street, warned the gaunt outlaw that danger lay waiting there behind the silence of the deserted street.

Long Sam pulled his hat back on, brows still lumped above probing eyes that were the color of smoke. The nerve-bending silence of the town that was lighted but apparently deserted made him visualize a keg of powder, with a sputtering fuse that had burned down alarmingly close to setting it off. If he could hear even a muted whisper or two, or see some living, breathing human being move past a lighted window or doorway, it might be different.

Long Sam saw a man then. The gaunt outlaw pulled in his breath slowly, and his lean hands closed over the smooth, black butts of six-shooters that were holstered at his lean thighs. The man was there on the boardwalk, standing stock-still, peering into the black shadow that lay between the two buildings.

Littlejohn could hear his own heart pounding, and was forced to release the breath he had caught and held so long. How in blue blazes had that gent got there without making any sound? And why that catlike crouch, unless he meant to start a ruckus of some kind?

The gaunt outlaw's thin lips formed a silent whistle of mingled relief and surprise. The man on the walk was moving on, and only the faintest hint of a gritty whisper told of his feet passing over the warped boards.

Littlejohn pressed slowly forward, peered cautiously around a corner of the building against which he had stood. He could see the man's figure clearly now, limned against a bright swath of light that spilled from big windows down the street. The silently treading man was small, wiry and bow-legged, and suddenly Long Sam Littlejohn felt a definite jolt of unpleasant surprise as the fellow halted where the first fringes of light touched him.

The wiry prowler wore a fringed buckskin jacket, dark colored trousers, and Indian moccasins. Twin guns jutted out from his scrawny thighs, and his slim, narrow hands were never more than scant inches from the ivory grips of the six-shooters.

"Smoky Bardeen!" Long Sam whispered. "No wonder this durned town is afraid to even whisper. But where's that fire-spittin' sheriff, Alf Neal? He ought to take a hand even if Smoky Bardeen has treed his town. But, at that, I reckon the safest thing—"

"Is for you to stand stone still!" a voice whispered tensely.

Long Sam stood stone still. A gun had punched the small of his back, hard. But the feel of the gun did not bother him too much. What had just naturally turned him to stone was the fact that it had been the

voice of a woman ordering him to stand still!

Before he ever saw her, Long Sam Littlejohn knew that the woman who had captured him was young. It was in her voice, in the quick, sure way she moved. She had backed him out from between those two buildings where she had caught him flat-footed, then headed him east along the cluttered alley behind the business buildings. The gun never left the outlaw's back, and the woman never lifted her voice above a whisper as she gave commands.

LEAVING the business section of the town, they turned into a side street at the girl's low-voiced command. Littlejohn marched silently ahead, more puzzled than uneasy. He was beginning to wonder if the girl meant to march him completely out of the town when she ordered him to turn in at a house that was surrounded by tall cottonwoods and a stout picket fence that looked ghostly white as he approached.

He got the gate open after only a little fumbling at the latch, then went down a long flagstone walk toward a house that loomed large and dark beneath the cottonwoods. But as he climbed up broad steps to the porch, Littlejohn saw faint traces of light showing around carefully drawn window blinds.

"Don't be bashful," the girl said. "Just open the door and walk right in."

It was the first time she had spoken in a normal tone, and Littlejohn liked the low-pitched, slightly husky voice. He opened the door and stepped into a lighted living room, pulling the dusty black Stetson from his head as a slim woman leaped up from a chair, staring at him with eyes that were red and swollen from recent weeping.

"Don't be alarmed, Mother," Littlejohn's captor said behind him. "I

have this lanky bucko under control.”

She stepped into Long Sam’s view then, and he could feel his face twist into a slow grin as he looked down at her. She was, he judged, in her early twenties—a cute little redhead with full, red lips, a stubby nose that showed a splash of freckles across the low bridge, and green eyes that looked up at him defiantly. She held a .38 Colt leveled at him, and he noted that she handled the gun as if she knew the feel and balance of it well.

“Edna, who is this man, and why have you brought him here?” the older woman asked.

Her voice shook a little, and Littlejohn quit grinning when he glanced at her. Despite the silver beginning to show in her rich brown hair, she was as slim and pert as her red-headed daughter.

“This man is one of Smoky Bardeen’s hirelings!” red-headed Edna said firmly. “I was on guard at the front gate, and saw him sneak past our place a while ago. I followed him, and saw him stand in the shadows between Hi Dugger’s saloon and Monk McCray’s feed store until Smoky Bardeen came along. I couldn’t hear what they said, but Bardeen stopped, so it’s obvious that this man was hiding there with orders to bushwhack Dad!”

Edna backed away a pace, alert green eyes watching Long Sam narrowly. He glanced at her and just naturally could not help grinning again.

She wore levis tucked into shop-made boots, a tan shirt that had been built for a boy, and a cream-colored Stetson slanted over curly red hair at a rakish angle. A cartridge-studded belt spanned her slim waist, with a basket-weave holster that would fit the gun she held in one small but capable hand.

“Edna, haven’t you made some sort of mistake?” The girl’s mother spoke uneasily. “This man doesn’t look like

those others who came with Smoky Bardeen. He looks tired or ill, and if that isn’t blood on the left side of his shirt I’m badly mistaken.”

“Blood?” the little red-head echoed, and Littlejohn saw her green glance drop, study the caked, stiff spot on the side of his shirt.

“Carrie, what in thunder are you and Edna jabberin’ so much about?” a man’s petulant voice asked.

Littlejohn’s eyes whipped toward the sound, and suddenly the grin was gone from his face. A man was striding into the room from a door at the far end—a tall man with thick, grizzled hair, and the coldest gray eyes Long Sam Littlejohn had ever looked into.

“Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat!” the grizzled man yelped, and stabbed his right hand toward the gun that sagged at his thigh.

But the moment he made that stabbing motion, his lean face twisted in pain, and his thin lips jerked as if he were cursing behind set teeth.

“Sheriff Alf Neal!” Long Sam said wearily. “Yuh’re about the last man I wanted to run into, mister. But this cute little carrot-top, here, sort of forced the issue.”

THE GRIZZLED sheriff stood regarding Littlejohn narrowly, slowly flexing the fingers of his right hand. Long Sam looked down at the hand, and saw that the fingers were thick and puffy, and that the whole hand was swollen.

“Dad, this fellow is one of Smoky Bardeen’s bunch!” Edna said crisply. “I caught him hiding in a dark place, waiting, no doubt, to bushwhack you.”

The tall sheriff came forward, a puzzled look in his eyes as he studied Long Sam.

“So yuh finally quit playin’ it lone-handed and throwed in with Bardeen, did

yuh?" he asked coldly.

"No," Long Sam said flatly.

"Glory be!" Edna Neal said mockingly. "He can talk, after all. But don't let him make a liar out of me, Dad. I saw him meet Smoky Bardeen."

She went on to explain how she had seen Long Sam pass the house on his cautious way into town, and how she had followed, spying on him while he stood there in the black shadows between the two buildings with Smoky Bardeen halted only a few feet from him.

"I couldn't hear what they said, so they must have talked in low tones," she finished. "But who is this fellow, Dad? I keep thinking I've seen him somewhere, but can't be sure."

"Yuh've seen his pictures on reward dodgers, youngster." Sheriff Alf Neal grinned mirthlessly. "This two-legged lobo yuh've rounded up is Long Sam Littlejohn."

"The outlaw and gunman that Deputy U. S. Marshal, Joe Fry, was telling us about last week!" the girl cried.

"And I guess about what kind of rep Fry gave me, Miss Edna," Littlejohn sighed.

"But Fry said you're a lone-wolf bandit, and that you've never worked with or for other outlaws," the girl declared. "So you've hooked up with Smoky Bardeen only recently, I suppose?"

"I'm not hooked up with Smoky Bardeen," Littlejohn told her quietly. "Yuh didn't hear us say anything down there a while ago because there wasn't any talk. I was standin' in that dark place between the two buildin's, tryin' to figger out what had Firefly so blamed quiet, when Bardeen showed up smack in front of me, blamed near in arm's reach. I didn't even know who he was till he went on past, and I got him against lighted windows.

"I suppose yuh just paid a friendly visit to our town, never even dreamin' that Smoky Bardeen and his gun wolves are tryin' to take over," the sheriff sneered.

"I didn't know Smoky Bardeen had decided to add Firefly to the half dozen river towns him and his killer pack already rule." Littlejohn shrugged. "I come into town tonight because Joe Fry laid my side open with a rifle bullet early this mornin', and I wanted a doctor to take care of the wound before I swum my Sleeper hoss across the river to Mexico."

"Save yore lies for somebody who'll believe 'em!" the sheriff said coldly. "Yuh're no doubt here to help Smoky Bardeen. But yuh'll not help him, Littlejohn. I'll jail yuh, then keep my appointment with that cocky little devil, thirty minutes after moon-up."

"Appointment?" Long Sam asked sharply.

He glanced at the sheriff's wife, who had sunk down into a chair and was crying brokenly. The gaunt outlaw looked at Edna, and saw that her face had gone pale, and that her lips were trembling.

"Yuh're workin' for Smoky Bardeen!" the sheriff glared at Long Sam. "You know I told him to be out of Firefly by thirty minutes after moonrise or answer to me. So—"

"So yuh glory-hungry, thick-witted fool," Long Sam cut in harshly, "yuh flung a gun-challenge into the teeth of the snakiest, trickiest crook along this river, and haven't got any better sense than to think yuh can live to brag about it afterwards."

"Watch yore tongue, or I'll pistol-whip yuh off yore big feet!" the sheriff warned angrily.

"So Smoky Bardeen *is* tryin' to add Firefly to his string of towns, is he?" Long Sam asked bluntly.

“He showed up here a week ago today, and bought out Ed Kimbaugh’s Palace Saloon before I knowed what was happenin’,” the sheriff scowled. “Bardeen has been dickerin’ for other places, but I passed out word that any man who sold him anything would have me to deal with. Bardeen and two of his top gunmen, Utah Willard and Harp Colby, called on me at my office this mornin’. Bardeen had the gall to tell me flat that I could either stop buckin’ him or get hurt. I ordered him to take his gun-slingers and get out of town. He laughed in my face, and I told him to be out of Firefly by thirty minutes after moonrise tonight, or I’d blast him out!”

“Yuh addle-pate, that’s what Bardeen wanted!” Littlejohn growled. “If yuh stepped out on that street tonight, yuh wouldn’t live thirty seconds. Barrel-stomached Utah Willard and that lank, loose-jointed Harp Colby cuss will be hidin’ somewheres with sawed-off shotguns. Smoky Bardeen will show hisself, and yuh’ll start walkin’ towards him with the full moon makin’ plenty of light. A scattergun will open up from some dark place, and buckshot will tear yore fool head off before yuh have a chance to even touch a gun.”

EDNA NEAL and her mother were both weeping now, and Littlejohn knew a moment of contrition over his own bluntness. But Sheriff Alf Neal only sneered at him, cold eyes mocking.

“Yuh scare me plumb green, noose-bait!” he said gruffly. “But just save yore breath from now on. I’ll take care of Smoky Bardeen. He ain’t comin’ here to turn this town into a hole of honkytonks and dives, the way he’s doin’ to some other towns down the river.”

“I’m glad yuh’ve at least got an idea as to how Smoky Bardeen runs a town once he gets control of it,” Littlejohn said

grimly. “And I hope yuh also know how him and his gun-hung crew treat decent people who try to live in his towns. If yuh know that, too, Neal, mebbe yuh can guess how two pretty women, such as your wife and daughter are, will make out here in Firefly after yuh’re planted in Boot Hill and Bardeen has took over.”

“Yuh hellion!” the sheriff rasped, and lunged at Long Sam, trying clumsily to jerk his gun.

But Edna Neal and her mother rushed the sheriff, blocking him before he could get the gun clear.

“I didn’t mean to say what I shouldn’t, and I think yore wife and daughter know it, Neal,” Littlejohn said coldly. “Eyen if yore gun arm wasn’t crippled, and Smoky Bardeen would meet yuh in a fair fight, yuh still couldn’t match his speed.”

“So yuh know my gun arm’s crippled, do yuh?” the sheriff panted. “Well, that clinches it, Littlejohn. Yuh’re probably the Bardeen bootlicker who was hidin’ in my barn when I went to feed my stock. If I’d seen yuh before yuh knocked me cold, then twisted this arm of mine till yuh sprained it—”

“Dad, please be reasonable!” Edna interrupted when her father tried to wrench loose.

“HmMMM!” Littlejohn hummed, frowning thoughtfully. “Mebbe Bardeen does aim to handle yuh tonight, instead of havin’ Utah Willard or Harp Colby do it. Sendin’ one of his plug-uglies to waylay yuh and cripple yore gun arm sounds like Smoky might aim to blast yuh down hisself, to sort of impress the local people.”

“Stop jabberin’, and head for that door, Littlejohn!” the sheriff snapped. “I’ll jail yuh, then take care of that weasel-brained Smoky Bardeen cuss.”

“Just a minute, Alf,” the sheriff’s wife said quietly. “Long Sam Littlejohn is an

outlaw, and I suppose arresting him is your sworn duty. But he's wounded, and that wound will be dressed before you leave this house with him."

"He's probably gone without food today, too," Edna put in quickly.

"You two quit wartin' me!" the sheriff snapped peevishly. "Littlejohn is goin' to jail, and right now. What difference does it make whether he starves to death, dies of gangrene or hangs? He's a dad-blasted outlaw, and deserves whatever happens to him."

"Dad, it isn't like you to say such callous things!" Edna protested in honest surprise.

Long Sam looked at the red-headed girl, then at her mother.

"Mrs. Neal, you and Miss Edna want to help me, don't yuh?" he asked slowly.

"We intend to help you," the sheriff's wife told him calmly. "I was a trained nurse before I married, and I've schooled Edna in nursing, too."

"Cut out this nonsense, Carrie!" the sheriff grumbled.

"Dr. Tate is out of town for the night, Dad, and you know it!" Edna said briskly. "You can't jail this man until that wound is taken care of. And Mom's cooking will be better for him than that greasy mess you'd take to his cell from some beanery."

"You and yore ma are tryin' to stall around so's I'll be late with my chore of smokin' Bardeen out of town!" the sheriff fumed. "But it won't work. I'm jailin' Littlejohn right now, so—"

The sheriff's voice ended in mid-sentence. Long Sam Littlejohn spun suddenly, his big shoulders dipping, then snapping forward and up in a powerful driving motion. There was the hard sound of flesh and bone grinding together, and Edna Neal's shrill cry of angry surprise. Sheriff Alf Neal rocked, lifted stiffly up on his toes, then pitched forward into Long

Sam Littlejohn's arms.

"You rotten coward!" Edna shrilled, and the .38 was in her hand, the hammer flicked back to full cock.

LITTLEJOHN lowered the senseless sheriff to the floor, then straightened, turning slowly to face the girl. Her green eyes blazed coldly at him out of a white, frightened face, and the cocked pistol in her hand leveled at his midriff.

"I'd like to make a deal with yuh, Miss Edna," he said gently.

"Make a deal with me!" she scoffed: "You just struck my father a cowardly blow when he wasn't even watching you. I'll make no deal with you!"

"I clouted yore dad when he wasn't watchin' me," the outlaw admitted. "But the blow was quick and clean. The worst the sheriff will suffer from what I done to him will be a sore jaw."

"What is this deal you'd make, Long Sam Littlejohn?" Edna's mother asked.

The outlaw looked at her, and saw that she was watching him in a puzzled way.

"You and Miss Edna patch up this side of mine, Mrs. Neal, then give me enough grub and black coffee to take the hunger shakes out of my hands," Littlejohn said slowly. "After that, loan me a pair of the sheriff's pants, one of his shirts and his hat."

"I thought that's what you had in mind," the sheriff's wife said tensely. "You and Alf are just about the same size. Dressed in his clothing, you could walk out into that street thirty minutes after moonrise, and none of those who will be watching would ever suspect that you were anyone except their sheriff."

"But Dad would be furious," Edna said uneasily.

"He'd better live and be furious than be foolish and die," Long Sam said stonily. "But do we make a deal, or not?"

It's up to you, ladies. . . ."

The door to the sheriff's office creaked faintly as it opened, and the sound was strangely loud in the eerily silent street. Then Long Sam Littlejohn's boot heels came down to the board walk, and the sound was almost thunderous in his own ears.

From the darkened office he had just left came a choked sob, then Edna Neal's voice, whispering tensely. Littlejohn's smoky eyes swept the silent, light-blotched street alertly as he stood there, wishing grimly that Edna had not insisted on coming here with him. He had argued himself hoarse in protest, but the girl had come just the same.

"Good luck, Sam!" her shaky whisper came to him now. "The best of good luck, and *vaya con Dios!*"

He made no answer. Far down the broad street a small, thin figure moved out into the white moonlight.

"Bardeen!" Littlejohn barely breathed the name, and his broad mouth quirked down in a satanic slant as he watched Smoky Bardeen come straight up the center of the street in calm strides.

Littlejohn went off the boardwalk and out into the deep dust, remembering to move in the slow, measured stride he had seen Sheriff Neal use. There was a whisper of sound then, a faint hint of voices and nervously shifting feet behind closed doors along the street.

From Littlejohn's coldly grinning lips came a faint dirge, hummed so softly that the sound would not carry to the keenest ears. It was a habit of his, that humming of a range dirge when red perdition was about to burst around him. And those who knew the gaunt outlaw even fairly well admitted that someone was due for swift and sudden trouble when he began humming that funereal music.

Smoky Bardeen laughed, suddenly, and the sound of it was as sharp as a puppy's bark echoing along the street. He was hurrying now, closing the distance between himself and the man he thought to be a lame-armed sheriff.

But Long Sam Littlejohn was not watching Smoky Bardeen. The gaunt outlaw's smoky eyes were raking the pools of shadow along each boardwalk, probing, searching, examining what he judged to be the more logical spots for bushed-up gunmen.

And suddenly his humming lifted, almost reaching a pitch that might have been heard by others. In a narrow runway between two buildings he had seen a ghostly light object move just a little. That he had seen a man's face there in the shadows Littlejohn did not doubt for a second.

He slowed his own pacing, marking the spot where that bushed-up gunman crouched so that his eye could switch back to it later. He looked at Smoky Bardeen, and felt his pulse swing into a faster pace. Bardeen was closer than he had realized, but still coming fast, little puffs of dust lifting behind his heels.

Then Long Sam's satanic grin widened under the downslanted brim of the almost white Stetson he had borrowed from the sheriff's clothes closet. From the tail of his eye he had caught a movement high up, and his swinging glance riveted on a man who sat crouched behind a tall false-front atop a general store.

Long Sam was still riding his hunch that Bardeen had planned to shoot it out with the sheriff personally. The fact that Smoky Bardeen had had one of his thugs knock the sheriff senseless, then twist his gun arm until wrist and elbow were badly sprained argued strongly that his hunch was sound.

YET Long Sam Littlejohn knew that he could be mistaken, and that riding that hunch might put him in a jackpot that would be the end of him. He glanced back at Smoky Bardeen and saw that the wiry little thug had slowed down now, was almost dawdling along.

"All you brush apes who are holed up behind doors and winders pay close attention, now!" Smoky Bardeen shrilled loudly. "You know yore badge-polishin' sheriff made this deal his ownself. But I want yuh to watch close, so's yuh'll see me give him a chance to start his draw before I ever touch a gun."

Smoky Bardeen meant to do this gun chore himself all right, and Long Sam Littlejohn grinned mirthlessly at the prospect. Fifty paces still separated them, and Bardeen was barely moving now, swaggering along at a slow walk.

"All right, law-dog!" he yapped at Long Sam. "Yuh asked for this. And thanks for wearin' that star tonight. It'll make a good target."

Long Sam said nothing, knowing that he could never imitate Sheriff Alf Neal's sharp, scratchy voice well enough to fool Firefly citizens who had heard Neal's voice for years. Littlejohn paced on, keeping that ambling, stiff-legged gait that resembled the sheriff's walk. Smoky Bardeen halted suddenly, scrawny neck craning forward.

"What's got into yuh, Neal?" he yapped. "Yuh so scared yuh can't even talk?"

Long Sam quickened his stride, closed in until a scant dozen paces separated them. He chuckled then, low and amusedly.

"Yuh still got that bullet scar I put across yore noggin the night I kept yuh from murderin' that Texas Ranger up at Hell's Gate, Smoky?" Long Sam's voice reached out, low and quiet and deadly.

Smoky Bardeen jumped as if a gun had gone off behind him. The voice had been too low to sound like anything but a jumble of muttered words to anyone listening behind the doors and windows along the street. But Smoky Bardeen had heard, and a squall of rage and alarm burst from his gash-thin mouth.

"Look out, fellers!" he howled. "We've been doublecrossed! This long-legged thing ain't—"

Smoky Bardeen never finished what he had meant to say. In his rage and excitement, his slim hands had gone for guns in a draw that was too fast for the eye to follow completely. And it was Smoky Bardeen's twin guns that threw the first thunderous sound of exploding along the street.

But Smoky's nerves were a mite off-key. He was remembering, no doubt, the night he had tangled with Long Sam Littlejohn about a year before. Bardeen's twin slugs came close, but did no real damage. And before he could thumb back and drop the spiked hammers for another try, twin chunks of lead slapped him in the face, stilling forever his dangerously fast hands.

Smoky Bardeen went over backward, his arms and legs raising a thin veil of dust as he threshed spasmodically. But Long Sam Littlejohn was not noticing that. The moment he had yanked guns he bent at the knees, then fell flat in the dust as his twin slugs smashed into Bardeen's face. And Long Sam's gaunt frame shivered spasmodically, for a charge of buckshot whistled over him as he hit the dirt.

He flipped his right-hand Colt up, slapped three quick shots through the corner of the false-front of the store where he had seen that hidden gunman earlier. On his third shot the man stood upright, screaming hoarsely as he pawed at his middle. He lurched, fell off the wooden

canopy, then came rolling down, a barrel-like, stubby man who kicked and squalled like a hurt cat even as he plunged toward the earth.

“Utah Willard!” Long Sam muttered, but was blasting at the black maw between a couple of buildings where he had seen the pale blur of a face when he came down the street.

A buckshot gun went off there with an earsplitting roar, but the muzzles were upslanted, and the double charge tore a ragged hole through the roof of a wooden canopy. A dim figure reeled in the shadows, and a man’s voice cursed in pain and rage.

ASIX-SHOOTER spat flame and thunder, and Long Sam stuck his chin in the dust when a bullet singed the nape of his neck. Littlejohn shot twice at the gun flash, and watched a gaunt, loose-jointed man lurch out across the boardwalk, nosedive out into the dust, and lie limp and unmoving.

“Harp Colby,” the gaunt outlaw said musingly, and lurched to his feet as doors began slapping open all along the street.

Voices and pounding feet made a bedlam of the town, and Sheriff Alf Neal’s name was being shouted from every quarter. Long Sam Littlejohn hopped across the boardwalk and into the black shadows between two buildings, moving as if he meant to investigate something mighty fast. Once in the shadows he jammed his guns into holsters and went racing toward the rear of the buildings, cursing through locked teeth when he barked his shins on a clutter of crates and other rubbish.

He got out of the alley and swung east, putting on a burst of speed now that he

could see where he was going. But he dug his boot heels in and stopped suddenly, his eyes swinging to three saddled horses that were bunched behind one of the buildings. Or maybe it was the moonlight gleaming on the gold trappings that decorated one of the saddles that had caught his eye.

Long Sam did not know, and did not care. He grinned suddenly and a little crookedly, his smoky eyes shining with pleasure.

That gold-crusted saddle was known all along the Rio, and some folks claimed it had cost Smoky Bardeen around two thousand dollars. But it was the three horses that had Long Sam’s fingers trembling a little as he began untying the reins that held them. They were sleek, slim-legged creatures, those three horses, and a man with only half an eye could see thoroughbred in every inch of them.

Long Sam went up into the gold-trimmed saddle, gripping the reins of the other two thoroughbreds as he clucked the three horses into motion. He angled away from town and got behind screening brush before any of Firefly’s citizens got around to the alley to see him.

“Hoss thief!” his conscience seemed to shout at him.

“I ain’t no such!” he argued aloud. “Leavin’ these three beauties plumb homeless, now that their masters are defunct, would be a sin and a shame. Besides which, Don Roberto Madero, south of the Rio, will pay a whackin’ good price for three beauties like these, and a bounty-plastered rooster by the name of Long Sam Littlejohn has to make expenses somehow. So come on, ponies, and we’ll take us a nice, cool swim soon as we gather up that Sleeper hoss of mine!”