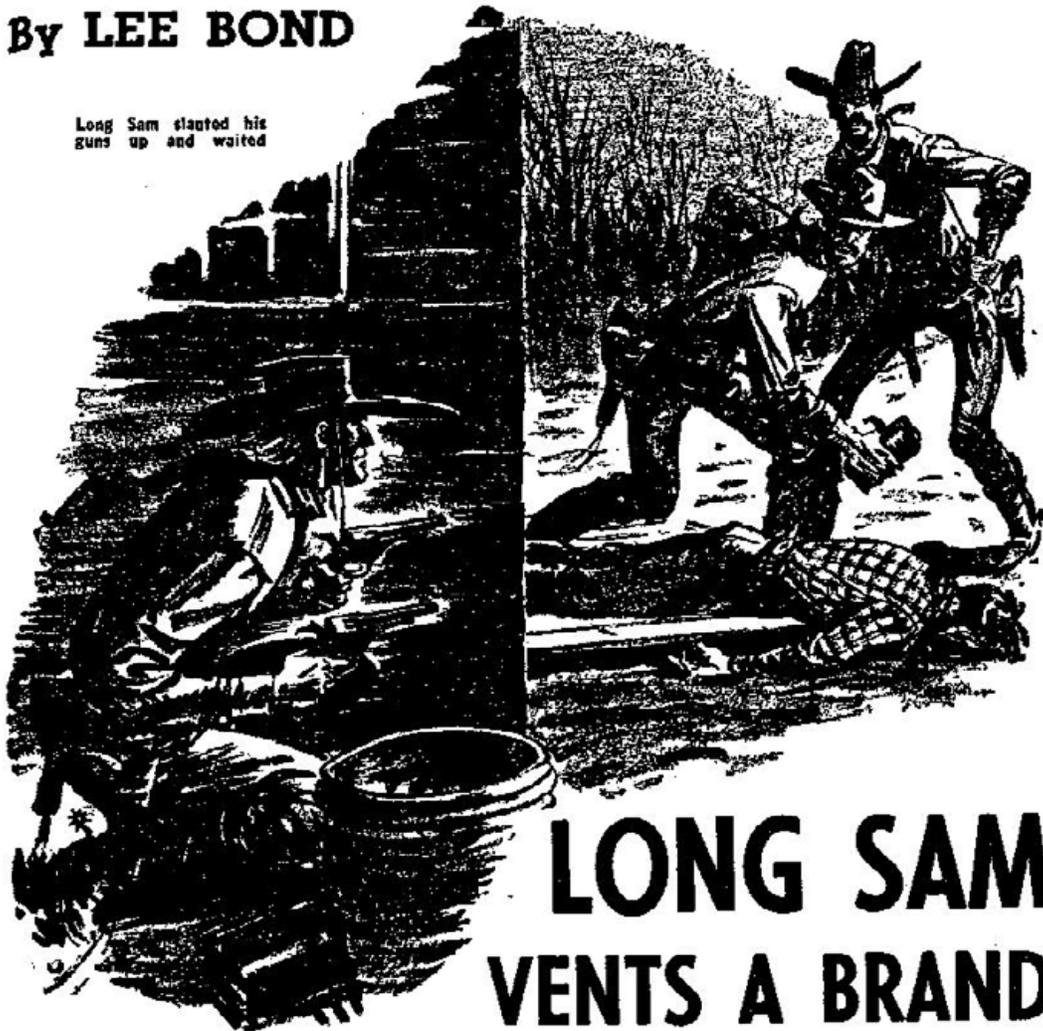


By **LEE BOND**

Long Sam slanted his
guns up and waited



LONG SAM VENTS A BRAND

Outlaw Littlejohn Helps the Toughest Sheriff in Texas!

ALTHOUGH it was past midnight, there were still people on Vista Verde's main drag. At sight of those late strollers, "Long Sam" Littlejohn swore under his breath, halting the tough old roan horse he called "Sleeper" at the street's east side.

"Half tipsy cowhands and town bums, mostly," Long Sam growled.

He slumped wearily in the saddle, a gaunt, unusually tall man who was dressed in jetty black from boots to flat-crowned Stetson. The roan under him stirred, nickered pleadingly as it looked toward a corral that circled a big livery barn.

"Yeah, I know you're fagged out and wolf hungry, fella," Long Sam said sympathetically. "Was a time when we could hit this town, put you in that barn of old Stub Jackson's yonder, and rest ourselves a day or two. Only, Pete Ballard isn't the sheriff down here any more."

Outlawed, with a cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam could never ride boldly into any town. Even in a town where the local lawman would not bother him, Long Sam still had to be careful, for there were always hombres around who would jump at the chance to collect the reward money on a

wanted man's head.

But this Vista Verde was far worse than the average town Long Sam might have hit, for the man who now wore the sheriff's star was an outlaw hater from way back.

Ben Miller, Long Sam had heard the new sheriff called. And if even half the tales about Miller's blind, unreasoning hatred for any man outside the law were true, then Long Sam reckoned he was seventeen kinds of a fool for not just splitting the thickets on to the muddy old Rio, a mile south, and swimming his tired horse across to Mexico.

"With a bunch of owl-eyed galoots still stompin' around the streets, Ben Miller will be up and on the prowl," the gaunt outlaw ruminated. "But if I can slip in yonder to the back of Dan Cooper's Mercantile and wake the old scamp up, maybe I can get what I need without a side-order of blue whistlers thrown in plumb gratis by that Ben Miller fella."

Long Sam fidgeted uneasily, walking his horse quietly along the southernmost fringes of Vista Verde. A big moon hung almost straight overhead, turning the Texas night bright in its silvery glow.

"Somethin' tells me I ought to head south and cross the Rio, grub or no grub," the gaunt outlaw muttered grimly.

But Long Sam did not turn south into the towering walls of brush. He went on west along the edge of the town, until he saw the familiar barn and corral where old Dan Cooper kept his teams. Cooper's black delivery hack was drawn up at the corral gate, and Long Sam had to hold a tight rein to prevent Sleeper from hurrying eagerly toward the corral.

"Sorry, old boy, but you'll have to wait a while," the outlaw said, swinging out of the hand-tooled black saddle.

Long Sam tied Sleeper securely to a bush, then stood there a moment, studying

the dark outlines of Dan Cooper's big Mercantile. Scrawny little old Dan Cooper was a bachelor, and had built living quarters on the back of his store. Long Sam hoped he could ease up to Cooper's bedroom window and get the old fellow awake without making too much fuss.

"If I can make Dan savvy who I am before he gets to screechin' too loud, everything will be all right," Long Sam mused.

He skirted past the merchant's corral, smoky eyes keenly studying the hundred yards of open ground between there and the back of the store. He wrapped lean hands around the black butts of matched six-shooters to keep them from bouncing out of leather, then went across the open ground at a run.

Nothing moved within his range of vision, and he was slowing down, stepping into a band of shadow behind Dan Cooper's store, when he saw the sprawled figure of a man.

LONG SAM flattened against the back wall of the store, alert but not jumpy. A man lay stretched out on the ground at the edge of Cooper's small, roofless back porch. Long Sam saw the moonlight glinting on the backstrap of a six-shooter that was holstered on the fellow's right thigh.

"Some drunk stumbled around here and passed out, maybe," the outlaw muttered softly.

He started forward, but had barely pulled his shoulders away from the store wall when he heard a faint, scuffing sound. Long Sam folded down silently, the deadly guns coming swiftly from holsters as he squatted on his heels.

Dan Cooper's back door opened and two men came out onto the little plank porch. One of them was tall and lean, while the other seemed small and gnarled

of body, with abnormally long arms and legs.

“Give me that *dinero*, Ike!” the tall one said.

“We could slip us out a bill or two, Bob, and nobody would be the wiser,” the spidery-looking Ike declared.

“No, you fool!” lanky Bob retorted. “Old Grady Holden drewed a even two thousand dollars from the bank just before closin’ time, today. Every cent of it has to be found on that kid, there, when Ben Miller hears shootin’ and comes around to investigate.”

Long Sam held his breath, feeling sweat ooze out of his pores. The names, Ike and Bob, plus the spidery looks of scrawny Ike, had clicked in Long Sam’s mind.

Those two men were Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap, two of a four-man gang of bandits and smugglers who had kept lawmen on both sides of the Rio Grande cursing their very names for several years. A burly, red-faced hombre named Alf Bishop was the brains of the bunch, bossing this spidery little Ike Dunlap, lanky Bob Hill, and a stocky, moon-faced tough named Ed Taber.

“Here, take the money,” Ike Dunlap was snickering. “I sure want to see the expression on Ben Miller’s face when he strikes a light to see who you and me caught robbin’ Dan Cooper. If you busted Cooper’s skull in when you warped yore gun over his bald head, so much the better!”

“You guzzled too much nose-paint before we started this chore, dern you!” Bob Hill growled. “Alf’s whole scheme for gettin’ a jerkline on Ben Miller would be ruined if I had busted Dan Cooper’s skull. Old Dan will be comin’ out of it any time, now. I’d better slide this money inside the kid’s shirt, then send a bullet through the meat of his leg so’s it’ll look

like one of us nicked him while he was makin’ a run out this back door. Soon as my gun cracks, you bust two or three caps yourself, Ike.”

“We’ll have Ben Miller where we want him, unless that sorrel-topped Milly put too much sleepin’ powder in the kid’s drink,” Ike Dunlap grunted.

“Joe almost come out of it while we was packin’ him around here!” Bob Hill snorted. “That kid will come awake when my slug digs into him!”

Bob Hill stepped toward the edge of the porch, the small package he had taken from Ike Dunlap in his right hand. Long Sam Littlejohn slowly cocked the six-shooters in his hands.

The sharp clicking of hammer dogs was loud in the night’s silence, and suddenly Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap goggled towards the black shadows where Long Sam crouched. Hill dropped the package of money, slashing his hands to gun butts as the package fell.

“Hold it, Bob!” Long Sam droned. “You, too, Ike!”

“I see the bulk of the son—in them shadders, there!” Ike Dunlap shrilled.

“Quiet, you half-tipsy fool!” Hill rasped. “I see the outlines of the gent, too. But I heard a couple guns bein’ cocked, which means he’s got us cold, Ike!”

“That’s usin’ your head, Bob,” Long Sam said guardedly. “You and Ike shed your guns and belts, then hightail.”

Long Sam had been careful to speak in a low, flat tone, not wanting Hill and Dunlap to recognize his voice. He slanted his guns up at them and waited now, watching Bob Hill slowly lower his left hand, unfasten a gun-weighted cartridge belt. The belt and pistol thumped the boards a moment later.

Long Sam’s eyes switched to Dunlap, watching the spidery, pinch-faced little tough narrowly. Dunlap was fiddling with

the buckle that held his gun belt.

"Danged buckle is stuck," Dunlap grumbled.

"No monkeyshines, now!" Bob Hill snapped at him. "The gent in them shadders yonder could blast—Dan Cooper is comin'! Hightail, Ike!"

THE RACKET inside the merchant's living quarters was heard by Long Sam, too. It sounded as if someone had bumped into a chair that tipped over. Then Dan Cooper's voice lifted in an angry oath, and lanky Bob Hill sailed off the porch and went sprinting down the cluttered alley.

But Ike Dunlap was not running. He suddenly dived for the packet of money Hill had dropped on the porch, scooping it up with his left hand. At the same moment, a six-shooter the spidery tough had jerked began throwing thunderous shots into the night!

Long Sam felt the deadly slam of bullets against the wall around him. The gaunt outlaw tried a shot at Dunlap's spidery legs, missed clean, and was slammed hard against the wall by a bullet that ripped across his left ribs. Long Sam's left-hand Colt jumped and flamed then, and Ike Dunlap went sprawling off the porch.

"What in blue-blazin' sin is goin' on out here?" an angry voice yelled.

Long Sam grinned despite the pain in his wounded side. Scrawny little old Dan Cooper had jumped out the back door, a nightshirt whipping around his skinny shanks.

"Easy, Dan," Long Sam said quietly.

The merchant whirled, and Long Sam chuckled at the way his nightshirt whipped and billowed.

"Take it easy, Dan," the gaunt outlaw called again. "It's me, Sam Littlejohn!"

"What in tarnation happened out here, son?" the merchant yelped.

"We'll talk later," Long Sam said sharply.

He levered to his feet, pushed his guns into holsters and sprang out into the moonlight, snatching up the packet of money he had seen Ike Dunlap drop. Long Sam shoved the money into a pocket, then turned, lifted the lanky fellow Bob Hill had called Joe to his shoulder, and went up the steps.

"Sam, what in blazes are you up to?" Dan Cooper gulped, staring at the outlaw and the limp form he was carrying.

"Inside, man!" Long Sam panted. "If Ben Miller spots me, I'll be in a split stick!"

"By grab, that shootin' will fetch Miller!" Dan Cooper gulped, and jumped forward, swinging the screen door wide.

Long Sam staggered through the doorway, halting as he stepped into a dark little hall.

He heard Cooper come in behind him, letting the screen slam.

"Close the inside door, too, and lock it, Dan," Long Sam said sharply.

He heard the door being closed, then a lock rattled briefly.

"Now, will you tell me what in tunket took place out there?" Dan Cooper snapped.

"I'm not right sure what it was all about, Dan," the gaunt outlaw said, and explained what had taken place.

Cooper was cursing, clutching almost frantically at the paper-wrapped package Long Sam had pushed into his hand. Long Sam eased the senseless man he had carried inside to the floor.

"Keep your voice down, now," the outlaw warned. "I heard men come into the alley out there, Dan. Hunker down here and take a quick look when I strike a

match. I want to know who this 'Joe' party is."

"You don't need to bother lightin' a match, Sam," the merchant growled. "I got a good look at that kid when you fetched him up to the porch. He's Joe Miller, Ben Miller's boy."

"Judas!" Long Sam grunted. "Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap aimed for the sheriff to think his own son busted in here and robbed you!"

"Yeah, but what sense did their scheme make?" Dan Cooper snorted. "From what you heard, they aimed to leave Grady Holden's money inside Joe Miller's shirt."

"Are Alf Bishop and Ed Taber around here?" Long Sam asked quietly.

"I'll say they are!" Dan Cooper grunted. "Alf Bishop owns the Texas Star, biggest saloon and gamblin' hall in town. Ed Taber, Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap have been actin' as guards and bouncers around the dive. But what I'd like to know is why Hill and Dunlap tried to get Joe into trouble with that tough daddy of his!"

"Hill and Dunlap evidently aimed to wait out there until the sound of shots fetched Ben Miller to investigate, then tell him they just 'happened' to see somebody runnin' out yore back door and stopped him," Long Sam droned. "My guess is they aimed to hustle this Joe Miller lad inside, here, and 'find' that money on him with only Ben Miller for a witness."

"Ben Miller would beat this kid half to death over somethin' like that," Dan Cooper growled. "But why in blazes would Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap go to such pains to get the boy into trouble with his daddy?"

LONG SAM hesitated a minute before giving answer to Cooper's question.

"Alf Bishop is the galoot behind this scheme, Dan," Long Sam finally declared.

"And there was more to it than just gettin' Joe Miller into trouble with his daddy. Say Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap had hustled Joe inside, here, after the sheriff arrived. The boy evidently had been drugged and wouldn't have been able to talk very straight or very clear. If Ben Miller thought his own son had turned crook, how far do you reckon he'd go to keep that kind of a story from gettin' talked around?"

"By grab, Sam, that must have been it!" old Dan Cooper said excitedly. "Ben Miller is a prideful cuss. I reckon he'd crawl through Hades on his hands and knees before he'd want it known that his own son had turned bandit."

"And if a gent like Alf Bishop had somethin' on the toughest sheriff in Texas, that would make that sheriff dance to his fiddlin', then I reckon Alf would be settin' pretty, wouldn't he?" Long Sam asked drily.

"Great guns!" Dan Cooper gulped. "If Alf Bishop had any such goose-in-a-sack as that, he'd be the king of Texas smugglers inside of a year's time!"

"Alf Bishop and those three side-kicks of his have been too sharp to let any lawman get the goods on them, I know," Long Sam grunted. "Just the same, I'm some surprised that a bandit hater like this Ben Miller seems to be would let that bunch even light in his town."

"Alf Bishop come here nearly two years ago and put in that fancy deadfall of his," the merchant said. "Ben Miller hates his insides, and watches him close. But Bishop and them three toughs of his have behaved, and Miller can't do nothin' but let 'em alone."

"Now that a couple of Alf Bishop's thugs pulled a robbery and tried to frame young Joe Miller, I reckon the sheriff can crack down, can't he?" Long Sam countered.

"We better not let Joe's daddy know he was even around here, Sam," Dan Cooper said uneasily.

"Howcome?" the gaunt outlaw countered sharply.

"Ben Miller is awful hard on this kid," the old merchant explained. "Joe's nineteen or thereabouts, and the only child Ben and his wife have. Ben treats the boy like he was still in knee britches, and will maul the tar out of him if he finds out he's been shinin' up to Milly King."

"Milly King?" Long Sam echoed:

"Milly's a singer, and is the main reason Alf Bishop's Texas Star dive is always packed with bug-eyed galoots," the old merchant snorted. "She's a tiny little trick, red-headed and mighty purty—if a man likes 'em red-lipped, wise-eyed and with plenty of glitter."

"You think Ben Miller would give the boy trouble if he found out he'd been hangin' around Milly King and the Texas Star deadfall of Alf Bishop's, eh?" Long Sam asked.

"I know Ben would work this kid over, Sam," the merchant declared. "I've heard that Joe has a crush on Milly. I didn't put much stock in the tale, figgerin' a wise gal like Milly wouldn't do anything but laugh over a button like Joe shinin' up to her. But it looks like Milly King was maybe followin' Alf Bishop's orders by gettin' the fool kid hooked good. Milly is Alf's gal, and would do whatever he told her to, I reckon."

"How come old Grady Holden to leave the money he drew out of the bank here with you, instead of takin' it on out to his Ladder H ranch with him?" Long Sam asked.

"Holden aims to come through town about daylight, pick up the money, and ride on down to Sulphur Valley to buy a bunch of young heifers for sale down there," Dan Cooper explained. "The old

dunce was over at the Texas Star before he pulled out of town, and must have wagged his tongue about leavin' the money here. Next time he asks such a favor— Listen!"

Booted feet were slamming hard along the alley behind the building, and a man was shouting Sheriff Ben Miller's name in an excited voice.

"Some feller has found Ike Dunlap's carcass!" Cooper gulped.

"It took that bunch long enough to find Ike's remains," Long Sam snorted.

"Quick, Sam!" the merchant gasped. "I can travel in here without a light, so you pick Joe up and follow me. I'll hide you and him in the store, then tell Ben Miller truth enough to satisfy him but not enough to have him floggin' Joe."

Long Sam did not argue. He picked up the still senseless youth, slung him over one shoulder, then put a hand on old Dan Cooper's thin shoulder and let the merchant lead him down the black hallway to a door that led into the big store. As Cooper opened the door, boots slammed on the little porch at the back of his place and someone began yelling his name.

"Ben Miller, dang him!" the merchant sputtered. "Hike inside, Sam, and keep close to Joe, so's you can shush him in case he wakes up and tries to stir around."

AS HE stepped through into the store, Long Sam heard the door close and locked behind him. The gaunt outlaw glanced around, seeing the fixtures and the filled shelves dimly by moonlight reflected through the big front windows. He moved around behind a counter, laid Joe Miller down carefully, then let his nose and a memory of Dan Cooper's stock lead him to a hoop of cheese and the cracker barrel.

The outlaw sighed, sat down on the floor with his back to a counter, and began eating ravenously. He finished a thick slab of cheese and a handful of crackers, and

was trying to remember which shelf it was Cooper kept the canned peaches on, when the door through which he had carried Joe Miller only a few minutes earlier rattled warningly.

"I tell you there couldn't be anybody in here, Miller!" old Dan Cooper shouted loudly.

Long Sam leaped to his feet, went up and across the room to the hardware department, and slid in behind a heavy, scarred counter that had nail bins in front of it. The door at the back of the room rattled open and Long Sam ducked when he saw yellow lamplight reach along the floor.

"All right, simmer down, Dan," an edged voice was saying. "You admit that the prowler you heard in your bedroom knocked you cold before you knew for sure what was goin' on. Since the money Grady Holden left in your care wasn't stolen out of your bedroom, how do you know the man who struck you on the head didn't take somethin' out of your store?"

"What the heck would anybody be able to lug out of here, Ben?" Cooper asked harshly.

"Maybe some owl-hooter needed grub, or guns out of your rack, or cartridges for guns he already had," Miller began gruffly. "Besides, it's no secret that you sometimes have considerable cash money around. So some galoot could have decided to—*Joe!*"

Miller's voice ended on a startled yell as he pronounced his son's name. Long Sam Littlejohn swore under his breath, hearing Dan Cooper groan as if he had felt physical pain. Long Sam tugged the hat off his yellow-thatched head, crept to the end of the hardware counter and peered around it.

Joe Miller was on his feet, leaning against the counter Long Sam had left him behind. The boy's face was pasty white,

and his eyes looked bulged and glassy-bright in the glow of the lamp Cooper was holding.

But Long Sam's attention was riveted on Sheriff Ben Miller. The man was black maned, and had a long, narrow face. His nose was remindful of an eagle's beak, and hooked above a mouth that was thin and tight. Ben Miller's eyes were as black and shiny as greased shoe buttons, and seemed to bug out now as he stood there watching his lanky young son.

"Where—where am I?" Joe Miller croaked the words.

"You're drunk, by thunder!" Ben Miller bawled.

The sheriff lunged forward, grabbed a handful of the lad's shirt front. His face was white now, and there was cold purpose in the way he snaked his son across the top of the counter, then let him drop down to the floor.

"Get up from there, Joe!" Miller ordered, his voice thin and low and hard.

Joe moved sluggishly, clawed at the front of the counter, but slumped back to the floor, groaning as he lifted shaking hands to his temples.

"Let the kid alone, Ben!" Dan Cooper said harshly. "Ain't you got sense enough to see he's doped, not drunk like you're accusin' him of bein'?"

Miller turned, and something in his face made Long Sam reach down, slide his black-butted guns from holsters. The sheriff balled his hands into knotty fists, then shrugged and let them unfold again.

"You found Joe drunk some place and brought him in here to sleep it off," he said, almost gently. "Maybe I ought to 'preciate that, Cooper. But I don't. If you were bigger, and twenty years younger, I'd give you a beatin'. Get back, now, and keep your mouth shut. I'll show you how to handle a boy who disregards a father's advice against swillin' booze."

Ben Miller half turned, put a lean hand on a conical rack that was suspended from the ceiling on a swiveled chain. The rack held buggy whips, and Ben Miller spun it slowly, stopping the rack when he saw a bright-yellow whalebone whip that had a buckskin popper and a lead-weighted butt. He took the whip down, turning grimly back toward his slumped, badly dazed son.

“Blamed if I’ll see you horsewhip that kid, Miller!” old Dan Cooper yelled.

DAN HAD pulled on a pair of pants, but his nightshirt stuck out of the back, giving him a weird appearance. The scrawny old merchant stepped to the counter, set the lamp down above Joe Miller’s slumped figure, then stood directly in front of the boy, blue eyes blazing defiantly as he thrust his bald head out on a skinny neck.

“Step out of the way, Dan,” Ben Miller said evenly.

“You’ve got most of the people around here down on you for thumpin’ Joe around like he was a sniffly-nosed kid, instead of a man grown!” Cooper said harshly. “So far, nobody has had the sand to tell you that. But *I’m* tellin’ you, Ben. And I’m also tellin’ you that you’ll not whip Joe now, unless you whip me off my feet first!”

Dan Cooper was crowding seventy and would weigh maybe a hundred and forty pounds, fully clad. But he stood there with his head thrust out, thin jaws set stubbornly. Long Sam Littlejohn grinned a little, admiring the oldster’s pluck. Then Long Sam quit grinning, for Ben Miller reached out, grabbed at old Dan’s nightshirt and yanked savagely.

“Get your paws off me, Miller!” Dan squalled, and slammed a skinny fist into the sheriff’s face.

“Why, you dried-up old scamp!” Miller snorted, and yanked so hard Dan’s

nightshirt split apart, baring his bony arms and scrawny chest.

Ben Miller grunted, threw down a chunk of the white cloth that had remained in his hand, and stepped forward, reaching for the old man’s thin shoulder. But the struggle had given Long Sam Littlejohn time to cross the room on tiptoe.

The gaunt outlaw was standing close behind the lanky sheriff now, and there was a satanic slant to his mouth.

“Boo!” Long Sam said harshly.

Ben Miller whirled, eyes goggling. He made a yelping sound as he saw and recognized the gaunt, black-clad man standing there. Miller dropped the whalebone buggy whip, hand slashing for the gun on his right thigh. Long Sam’s grin got more wicked, and he loosed an uppercut that smashed against Miller’s jaw, jerking his boots clean off the floor.

Long Sam wrenched the pistol out of Miller’s hand, then stepped back and tossed the gun behind a counter. Ben Miller came to his feet slowly, white patches at the corners of his mouth as he measured Long Sam thoughtfully.

“Come on, tough boy,” Long Sam droned. “You can likely land a punch or two, if you try. Or have you got nerve enough to fight anybody besides a kid who is just learnin’ to shave, or a scrawny oldster like Dan, there?”

“I see blood on the side of your shirt and a bullet hole through the cloth,” the sheriff said slowly. “You were mixed up in that shootin’ out behind Dan’s bedroom tonight, eh, Littlejohn?”

“Alf Bishop meant to burn the outlaw brand onto this button of yours, Miller,” Long Sam said gruffly. “I vented the brand before it could do Joe any harm.”

“What in thunder are you talkin’ about?” the sheriff asked angrily.

Long Sam told him, bluntly and without hesitating any. He saw the sheriff

pale, and saw old Dan Cooper scowling and squirming and shaking his sore head in disapproval.

"So that's howcome Joe's in here, Miller," Long Sam finished gruffly. "But keep on thumpin' that boy around the way you seem to have been doin', and he'll wind up in serious trouble yet."

"You bounty-plastered scum!" Ben Miller croaked. "Do you think I'd take your word for this?"

"Whether you believe me or not, doesn't matter," Long Sam snapped. "After I've paid Dan for some supplies I need and head for Mexico, you can collar Bob Hill and put the screws on him. Get a gent like Hill in a tight, and—"

"And you'll likely wind up wishin' you hadn't!" a cold voice cut in. "Elevate, all three of you!"

QUICKLY, Long Sam turned his gaze toward the door that led into the living quarters Dan Cooper had built on the back of his store. Alf Bishop was stepping through that doorway, an ornate six-shooter jutting from his big, flabby hand.

The burly, red-faced man's eyes were slitted and glittering, and there was dangerous tension in him as he strode into the room, letting lanky, hatchet-faced Bob Hill and dumpy, moon-faced Ed Taber come through the doorway.

"Slide to the front and yank them blinds over the front winders, Ed!" Bishop said sharply. "You, Bob, get around behind Littlejohn and lift them guns out of his holsters."

"And the first one of you that takes a step to obey Bishop's orders, gets shot!" Long Sam said coldly.

Bob Hill's slate-colored eyes squinted, gleaming angrily as he looked at Long Sam. He had a six-shooter in his hand, as did Ed Taber. But they both hesitated, glancing at Bishop.

"You fool, there are three of us, and we've got the cold drop!" Bishop flung the words at Long Sam.

"That's right," the gaunt outlaw chuckled. "But you know I'd live long enough to shuck these guns and get off a shot, even if all three of you poured lead into me, Alf. And guess who's pretty, brocaded vest would get dusted with my slugs!"

"Put those guns up, you three!" Sheriff Ben Miller found his voice at last. "Bishop, what's the idea in this, anyhow?"

Bishop flinched, some of the ruddiness leaving his face as he stared at Ben Miller. Long Sam laughed, the sound low and hard and mocking.

"See what a mess you've made, Alf?" the gaunt outlaw taunted. "Milly did her work well enough—Joe's still out. He hasn't told his daddy anything. But you didn't know that. When Joe wasn't found out there in the alley where my lead piled Ike Dunlap up, you got panicky, thinkin' Joe had regained his wits and would maybe remember things that would have Ben Miller on your neck."

"The long-shanked son is right, Alf!" Ed Taber said in a thick, gruff voice. "That blamed kid couldn't have spilled the beans, for he's sure still dead to the world!"

"And ain't we bit off a chaw by overplayin' our hands!" Bob Hill gulped. "My gosh, we've got to—"

Hill broke off, swallowing hard as Bishop turned his head, glared at him.

"You three apes have got to try shuttin' the mouths of Ben Miller, Dan Cooper and young Joe Miller, and shuttin' them plumb permanent," Long Sam clucked. "I don't count. The testimony of a bounty-plastered galoot like me wouldn't be accepted by any court."

"But the bounty on yore hide will end up in our pockets, Littlejohn!" Bob Hill

snapped. "It'll be a pleasure for me to twist a slug into your middle, you tricky son!"

"Only, Bishop doesn't want any shootin', right now," Long Sam said, grinning coldly. "That bunch of galoots pressin' their noses to the window glass, yonder, have already seen too much."

Alf Bishop and his two hirelings swore in unison, their faces tightening as they glanced toward the front windows. And the moment the three pairs of eyes turned away from him, Long Sam Littlejohn plummeted down to the floor, throwing his gaunt body toward a stack of sacked flour as he flipped guns from holsters.

Bob Hill whirled and fired first, a raging oath on his lips as he realized that he and the other two had been tricked. Long Sam's big guns belched flame and Bob Hill died with that oath on his lips.

But Alf Bishop and Ed Taber were shooting now, their slugs spurting flour into Long Sam's face as they ripped through the ends of the sacks. Sheriff Ben Miller plunged down beside his son, snatching at the gun in Joe's holster. Old Dan Cooper seized the whalebone whip Miller had dropped to the floor earlier and brought the loaded butt of it down hard across the sheriff's black-thatched head.

Long Sam saw that in the seconds while he crouched behind the flour, spitting the stuff out of his mouth and trying to blink it out of his eyes.

"Circle left, Ed!" Alf Bishop bawled. "Get to where you can smoke that hellion out from behind that pile of flour sacks!"

Long Sam waited until he heard Ed Taber start running around the far end of the stacked flour, then slanted his left-hand Colt up and caught Taber in the face with a slug before the stubby gunman could crack a cap. Long Sam reared up then, a gaunt, white-splashed apparition with a smoking six-shooter in each bony fist. He

rocked drunkenly when a bullet ripped across his left cheek, then sagged forward when Bishop caught him along the right flank with another bullet.

BUT LONG SAM'S six-shooters were still roaring, and across the room he saw big Alf Bishop twist suddenly, take two uncertain steps towards a counter, then pitch down, coughing a spray of blood onto the floor.

"Sam, you're hit, son!" little old Dan Cooper yelled, darting to the gaunt outlaw's side.

"Yeah, I'm hit," Long Sam gulped. "But I'm gettin' my breath back, so likely I'm not hit too hard. Why in thunder did you knock Ben Miller on the head?"

"That cuss was gettin' hold of Joe's gun!" the merchant gulped. "He's got a one-track mind where outlaws are concerned. I was afraid Ben would turn that gun on you, if he got hold of it. We'll have to hide you some place until—"

"Until I get over this headache and can thank the bounty-plastered, noose-dodgin' cuss for pullin' this boy of mine out of the fire tonight," Ben Miller broke in drily.

The sheriff got up slowly, holding his left hand to the back of his head. He grinned in an odd way, and there was a grim kind of amusement in his bleak eyes as he saw Long Sam's guns swivel towards him.

"Put the guns up, Sam," he said quietly. "I'll sift. And I'll tell Doc Saddler to waltz down here and take a look at Dan's cracked noggin'. If Doc was to find somebody else back yonder in Dan's bedroom that needed some patchin', too, that'd be his business."

"Yeah, and you'd be stickin' yore punkin' head through one of my winders, with that cussed eight-gauge buckshot gun, you squinch-eyed galoot!" Dan Cooper said harshly.

“Hush up, Dan, before I happen to remember who assaulted which officer tonight with the loaded end of a buggy whip,” the sheriff chuckled drily. “Littlejohn has got my word that I won’t even peek inside your bedroom for the next week or ten days.”

There was a crooked grin on the sheriff’s hard mouth as he looked levelly at Long Sam.

The gaunt outlaw’s pain-drawn face twisted in a smile, and he slowly pushed his guns into holsters.

“Your word is good enough for me, Miller,” Long Sam said evenly.

“Thanks, Sam,” the sheriff said hoarsely. “That sprout of mine means the world to me—so much, that maybe I’ve been too harsh with him, just fearin’ he’d make some kind of fool mistake. You and Dan said things to me tonight about the way I’ve handled Joe, that hurt. But the things you said made me think, too. Some day, I’ll say my thanks when I get the thing all hammered out in my own

bonehead and really understand it. And I’ll make it up to Joe, too.”

THE sheriff turned jerkily, went down the room and out through the back part of the building. Old Dan Cooper let out a slow breath, turned amazed eyes on Long Sam.

“I never thought I’d see that cuss eat crow over anything, Sam!” the oldster said gravely. “Do you reckon you could trust him, son?”

“If you’ve still got that spare bed in that big bedroom you built back yonder for yourself, I’d like to stretch out until the sawbones gets here,” Long Sam said wearily. “And don’t worry about Miller botherin’ me. A man like him doesn’t break promises. Miller knows that his life would have been hell on earth if Alf Bishop had got away with brandin’ his son an outlaw. I’ll be plumb safe here, even if Ben Miller is the toughest sheriff in Texas!”