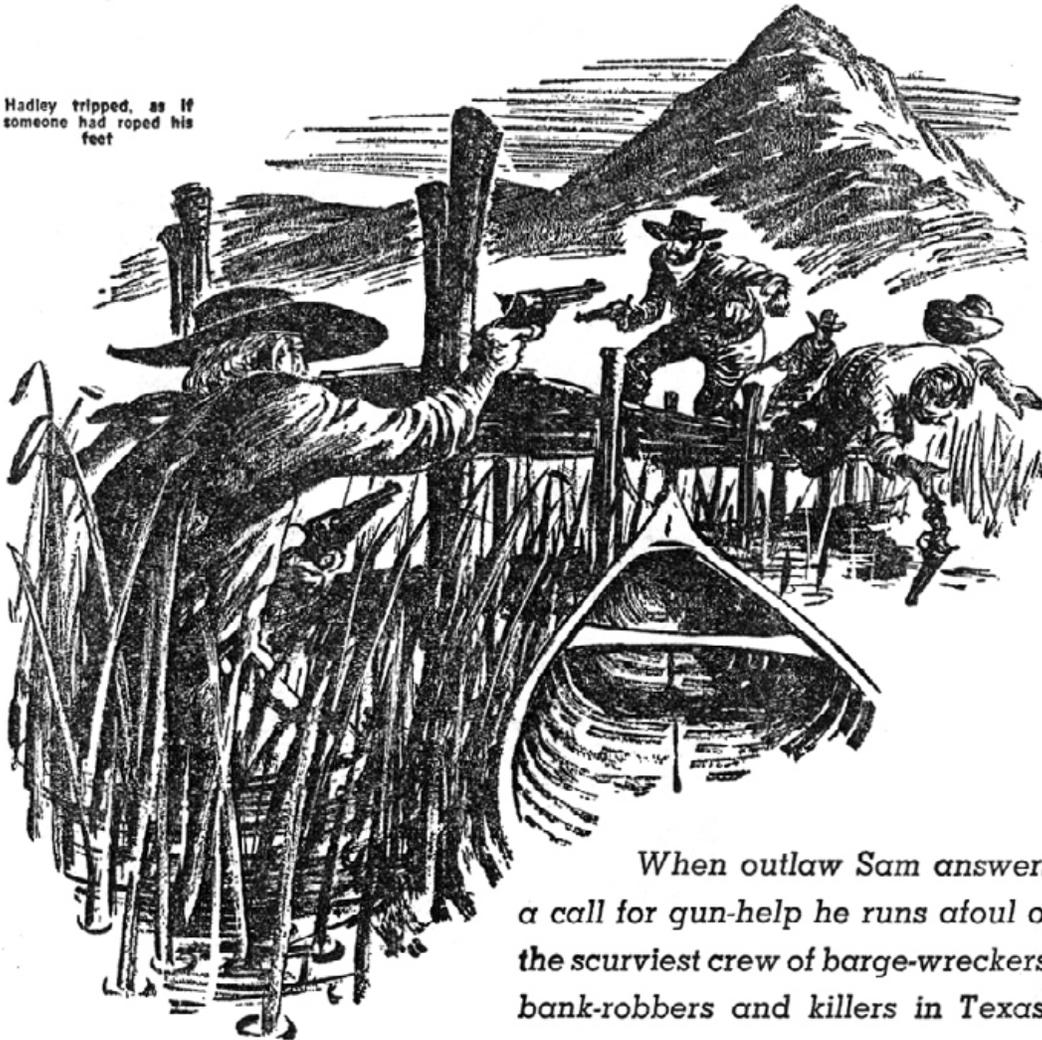


LONG SAM RIDES the RIVER

By LEE BOND

Hadley tripped, as if
someone had roped his
feet



*When outlaw Sam answers
a call for gun-help he runs afoul of
the scurviest crew of barge-wreckers,
bank-robbers and killers in Texas!*

BLACK SHADOWS cast by giant tupelo and cypress trees wrapped Long Sam Littlejohn and his ugly old roan gelding, Sleeper, in a protective cloak. Beyond the shadowy forest lay a natural meadow, bright under the Texas sun. Long Sam gazed across that meadow in astonishment, his smoke-colored eyes wide. Out there sprawled the busiest town he had seen in many a moon.

“Seein’ is supposed to be believin’, Sleeper, but hanged if I believe what I’m seein’!” Long Sam declared.

He pulled off a flat-crowned black hat, running bony fingers through a thick mop of yellow hair. He was a gaunt-flanked man, unusually tall even among the tall men of Texas. The sateen shirt, tough cotton pants and boots he wore were as black as the wide-brimmed hat he now put

back on his head. Crossed black belts held ebony-hued holsters against his bony thighs and from the tops of those holsters curved the black butts of matched six-shooters.

"Ho!" Long Sam commanded when Sleeper fiddle-footed.

But the nervous moving of his horse brought the gaunt man's attention away from the town. He sent a glance over one shoulder, eyes wary. He faced forward again, looking down at Sleeper's ill-shaped head. The roan's scrawny neck was turned to the left. A tingle of sharp unease went through Long Sam. Sleeper's crimped ears were cocked towards a point where the land tilted down to a forest bottom bordering Horse Bayou.

Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn's first impulse was to turn Sleeper around and ride quietly back into the timber. Bad tempered even with his own master, Sleeper gave forth that piggish sort of grunt only when he caught the scent of strange human beings.

"Whoever is down there is keepin' mighty quiet!" the gaunt outlaw fretted. "Maybe I better have a look. That cussed Joe Fry might have cut my sign!"

LONG SAM swung out of the saddle. Joe Fry was a deputy United States marshal, who worked out of Austin. Fry hated Long Sam bitterly, hounding and hunting him constantly. The stocky little derby-wearing deputy had a habit of popping up when Long Sam least expected him.

"Be just my luck to have that Fry pest build a fire under me before I could even get into that Little Boggy town, yonder, and find out what old Ed Scott wants of me," Long Sam grumbled.

He swore under his breath and went on, halting beside a huge tupelo bole when

he reached a point where he could see into the lower bottom.

The man Sleeper had heard or scented was not in the timber at all. He was out on the glassy water of Horse Bayou, Indian-paddling a big canoe so expertly there was no slightest sound from his efforts. The canoeist was burly, bull-necked and mean looking. He was towing another canoe behind the one he paddled, dark face turning constantly as he raked each shore of the bayou with nervous glances.

"That bucko is doggoned jumpy about somethin'," Long Sam muttered.

The burly man was heading his canoe inshore now, gliding soundlessly. Long Sam saw a trampled place where stock had often come to drink, and thought the man would land there. The canoes slid on past the spot, however, swinging in finally at a point where the earthen bank was eighteen or twenty inches straight above the water. The man shipped his paddle, reached up a powerful hand, and caught the butt of a huge cypress log that ran far out into the bottom.

"Buster interests me, but I'd better scoot before he finishes moorin' his fleet and comes prowlin' this way!" the gaunt outlaw muttered.

Long Sam was backing away as he muttered his thoughts aloud. When he was certain the man down at the water's edge could not see him, he turned and trotted back to Sleeper, swinging quickly into the saddle. He looked out across the sunlit meadow towards Little Boggy again. Five years ago, he recalled, that town had been nothing more than a cross-roads store with a half-dozen sorry shacks around it. Now the place was busier than a beehive, with a broad main drag fronted solidly by sturdy business buildings!

"I'd heard that old Ed Scott sure set this town to boomin' when he sold his Rail S cattle empire and moved down here,"

the outlaw chuckled.

Long Sam rode out into the bright sunlight, loping across the meadow towards the outskirts of the town. A mile or so beyond town he could see black smoke funneling up above sprawling structures that had been built along the banks of the Sabine River. That those were factories of some sort he did not doubt. He brought his attention back to the town, eyeing the teeming life along the street he was riding into. Then his wide lips grinned, and he was reining in before the only brick structure in the new, thriving town.

"Commerce Bank, which Ed Scott built to start this town hummin'," the gaunt outlaw chuckled. "Guess I may as well waltz in there and see what the old boy wants."

Long Sam went up the bank steps and into the lobby, an almost frightened feeling sweeping over him. The marbled bank lobby was full of jostling, noisy people, with long lines before the grilled-off windows. Long Sam found himself wanting to get out of there in a high lope. He saw a shiny oaken door at the back of the room, however, that had old Ed Scott's name on it in gold letters. He got to the door and thumped it with hard knuckles, sending an uneasy glance back into the crowded room.

"Come in!" a muffled voice bade.

Long Sam stepped hastily into a spacious, well-furnished office. A gaunt man with snowy hair and a seamed, lean face looked up across a big desk, blinked keen gray eyes in surprise, then levered to his feet, grinning as he pushed out a bony hand.

"Sam Littlejohn!" the white haired man cried. "Son, it does me good to see you. How are you?"

"I'm scared, Ed!" Long Sam chuckled, shaking hands.

"Scared?" Ed Scott asked, motioning the outlaw to a chair.

"That's right," Long Sam grinned as they both sat down. "Pokin' into a town full of people in broad daylight isn't my idea of playin' it safe. You've really built yourself a town here, Ed! Like this better than runnin' cattle out in the Panhandle?"

"I get lonesome for the Panhandle, Sam," the older man sighed. "But I'm too busy here to fret much. Once I broke the ice, other men with money to invest have come to Little Boggy. We've got lumber mills, a paper mill, rice mills and a number of other flourishing enterprises."

"But it hasn't all been smooth sailing, eh?" Long Sam asked, hoping the banker would say why he had sent for him.

"So my troubles with Mort Hadley are gettin' talked around, are they, Sam?" the old ex-cowman asked gravely.

"Not that I know of, Ed," the outlaw shrugged. "I never heard of anybody named Mort Hadley until you just called his name."

SCOTT snorted. "I wish I hadn't seen or heard of Mort Hadley! The fat devil owns a couple of saloons, several sawmills, and operates a string of barges that ply between Little Boggy and the Gulf."

"This Hadley jigger out to deal you some competition?" Long Sam asked.

"He's a cutthroat, at any thing he gets into!" the old fellow snapped. "But Hadley makes more trouble with his barges than anything else. He charges stiff shipping rates and manages to keep other barge owners along the Sabine from offering shippers better rates."

"No other outfit has the nerve to lower rates and tell Hadley to go jump, eh?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"One company, the Acme, tried it!" Scott replied grimly. "They lost eight

cargo barges and two tugs within six months.”

“What caused the losses?” Long Sam wanted to know.

“Mysterious explosions sank most of the barges on runs between here and the Gulf,” Ed Scott declared. “Fire got the tugs and three of the big shallow-draft barges.”

“And you think this Mort Hadley sank those barges and tugs to put a stop to cut-rate competition, eh?”

“Mort Hadley and those three gunmen of his, Dan Conklin, Zeke Wayne and Ward Potter, destroyed those barges and tugs.” Ed Scott growled. “I can’t *prove* that. But that pig-fat devil has to be stopped, Sam. I’m pulling wires now to get a huge canal run through here. Hadley is fighting that move bitterly, for the big canal would mean big barge outfits coming in with lower rates.”

“Well, Ed, I’m sure not a sea-going gent by any means!” Long Sam grinned. “But if needing help at puttin’ a halter on this Hadley gent is why you sent for me, I’ll be glad to help you any way I can.”

“Sent for you?” the white-haired banker echoed.

Long Sam snapped erect in his chair. He looked levelly at the older man, trying to spot something that would hint of joking. Ed Scott’s face was grave, his eyes puzzled.

“Word came down the outlaw trails that you wanted to see me, bad,” Long Sam explained slowly. “I was out at the head of this Sabine River when I heard of it, Ed. I rode close to five hundred miles to see what you wanted. You didn’t pass out word that you wanted to see me?”

“So help me, son, I didn’t!” the oldster cried. “But why would anyone else put out such word?”

“I don’t know why,” Long Sam scowled. “You happen to know a deputy United States marshal named Joe Fry?”

“I’ve heard of Fry,” the banker nodded. “Do you think he could have pulled this stunt of getting you here?”

“He could have, and would have if he thought it would give him a chance to nab me!” the gaunt outlaw grumbled.

“The Texas Rangers have never bothered you at all, have they, Sam?” Scott asked.

“Thank heavens, no!” Long Sam replied. “If those lads went after me, I’d be a sunk duck. But the Rangers seem to know that the only trouble I ever got into was over fightin’ the murderin’ mob the carpetbaggers put in as state police, right after the war.”

“I know, Sam,” Scott said gravely: “I remember you first got on the wrong side of things when the carpetbaggers were ridin’ roughshod over us all. But I had occasion to go to Austin a couple of months ago, son. On the way there, I noticed a number of big dodgers tacked to trees, fences and the like. Those dodgers had your picture, name, description and a list of crimes you’re supposed to have committed.”

“That’s Joe Fry’s work!” the gaunt outlaw declared angrily. “He’s tryin’ to pressure and bamboozle the Texas Rangers into turnin’ against me.”

“A man named Bob Gossard is our town marshal,” the old banker smiled. “Gossard is a friend of mine. I’ll speak to him if you want to stay around a while, son.”

“I’m gettin’ out of here, Ed!” Long Sam exclaimed. “Whoever passed out that lie that you wanted to see me had somethin’ besides a joke in mind, I’m afraid.”

"I don't blame you for being uneasy," the banker began. "I'm sorry my name was used to—"

Knuckles tapped smartly at the oaken door, causing Ed Scott to break off. He glanced at Long Sam who had jerked to his feet in a nervous movement.

"Who is it?" the banker called.

The portal opened a few inches. Long Sam heaved a sigh of relief when he saw a young fellow glance in, smiling pleasantly.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Scott," the young man said. "But Jim Nelson is here, wanting to see you. Mr. Nelson is very insistent."

"Tell Nelson I will see him in five minutes, Ted," Ed Scott directed.

The young fellow nodded, then closed the door.

LONG SAM tugged his hat on, glancing around the office. He saw a door in the rear wall, and surmised that it would lead out to an alley.

"Drat that Nelson, anyhow!" old Ed Scott was grumbling. "But I'll have to see the pest. Mort Hadley has no doubt sent him here for some reason or other."

"I see you've got a back door, Ed, so I'll use it," Long Sam drawled. "Glad to have seen you again. Maybe next time I drop in we can—"

Long Sam whirled, for the door leading out into the bank had slapped open. The gaunt outlaw's hands started toward gun butts, but halted inches short of the famous weapons. A stubby little man wearing a tailored gray suit, button shoes and a shiny black derby hat stepped inside, shouldering the door shut behind him.

The man's blunt-jawed face was flushed, his gray eyes shone hotly, and he grinned around the butt of a cigar that was clamped in one corner of his mouth. A cocked six-shooter jutted from the stocky

man's right fist!

"What's the meaning of this, Jim Nelson?" old Ed Scott's voice ripped out angrily.

"So this is the 'Jim Nelson' who wanted to see you, is it, Ed?" Long Sam sighed.

"This is Jim Nelson, Sam," the old banker growled. "I've no idea why he is here, pointing a gun at you. But I'm not surprised too much! Nelson runs with Mort Hadley. He's been here a couple of months."

"Relax, Ed!" Long Sam groaned. "This sawed-off thing with an armadillo's hull for a hat happens to be Joe Fry, the deputy United States marshal I was tellin' you about. If he's been around here for a couple of months, then the mystery of who sent out word that you wanted to see me is solved."

"And you walked into my little trap neat and quick, Sammy!" Fry chortled. "You have been a hard devil to corral, but I've a got— What the heck!"

Long Sam was wondering what the heck, too. A sort of roaring sound, as of distant thunder, filled the air. The two windows in Ed Scott's office wall jumped and clattered. The rumbling seemed prolonged, fading slowly. Outside, people were shouting frenziedly, a bell began clanging, and from down towards the Sabine River where Long Sam had seen those big buildings and smoke stacks, a whistle was screaming.

"The fire bell!" old Ed Scott yelled. "And that was some kind of explosion down at the river. That whistle—"

"Shut up, you old fool, and sit back down!" Joe Fry horned in savagely.

The shouting and yelling outside was a vast roar of sound now, and Long Sam could hear horses and rigs tearing along the street. The bell was still hammering wildly and the whistle down at the Sabine

was screaming louder than ever. Old Ed Scott's face paled, and Long Sam saw anger leap into the ex-cowman's eyes as he locked glances with Joe Fry.

"What authority do you think you have to point a gun at me and order me around, Mr. Fry?" Scott asked.

"Hobnobbin' with a vicious crook like this Littlejohn buzzard here, is enough reason for me to slam you in jail for questioning, if I take the notion!" Fry retorted.

Guns were roaring out along the street now and Long Sam wondered why anyone considered shooting necessary. The shouting and clattering and howling out there indicated that the townspeople were already thoroughly alerted. Suddenly there was a burst of firing either inside the bank or at the front door. Long Sam shot a worried look at Ed Scott, who had sworn thickly and started around the desk.

"That shooting was inside my bank!" the old man cried.

Ed Scott stalked around the desk, glaring when Joe Fry swore and punched at his middle with the cocked six-shooter. Long Sam groaned in dismay, fearing that the cocked pistol would go off. Ed Scott went against the gun hard, then spun suddenly on one foot, slashing down a lean arm that swept Fry's forearm and gun-filled fist aside. The six-shooter roared and Fry squalled like an angry cat, whipping the gun up and cocking it as he leaped back.

"The marshal at Austin happens to be a personal friend of mine, Fry!" Ed Scott gritted. "You'll pay for this bit of— What in time!"

Joe Fry had jumped back until his sturdy back flattened against the office door. But suddenly that door exploded inward with him, bowling him clean off his feet. Fry's six-shooter roared again, the slug driving into the floor as the deputy

fell. Then Long Sam and old Ed Scott were both yelling and ducking, for a slicker-clad, heavily-masked man crouched there in the open doorway, a blazing six-shooter in each fist!

"Bandits!" Ed Scott howled. "There are two more of the masked devils behind the cages, Sam!"

BUT LONG SAM had his own troubles just then. A bullet from the masked man's gun had raked across the left side of his face, making him dodge violently. The gaunt outlaw's deadly six-shooters came up roaring just as a shot from one of the masked man's guns knocked old Ed Scott tumbling. The masked man howled an oath and reeled backwards into the bank. Long Sam lunged towards the portal, remembering what Ed Scott had said about other masked men out there.

"No you don't, Sammy!" Joe Fry screeched, and slammed into Long Sam's midriff, head first.

Joe Fry was short-coupled, powerfully muscled, and as quick as a cat. He drove Long Sam savagely against Ed Scott's desk, swinging his six-shooter up. Long Sam slashed at Fry's back and shoulders with his guns, hearing the deputy curse in pain. Long Sam dropped his own left-hand pistol and seized Fry's gun wrist, forcing his hand down and to one side just as the pistol roared. The deputy bleated a furious oath and lunged against the outlaw, driving his hips savagely against the edge of Scott's desk.

"Bank robbers, Joe!" Long Sam gasped. "You fool, we've got to stop the bank robbers!"

Fry pounded his free fist into Long Sam's face. The outlaw rolled sidewise off the edge of the desk, hanging desperately to the officer's gun wrist. They went down in a hard fall, Fry's six-shooter roaring so

close to Long Sam's face the outlaw felt the flame of powder on his cheek and throat. The deputy drove a knee into Long Sam's middle, and the outlaw felt his senses reel from the sickening pain. He swung the six-shooter in his right hand, faintly aware that a jolting sensation ran along his arm.

"Tagged the runt!" Long Sam croaked dazedly.

Fry's blocky form flopped down on him. The gaunt outlaw struggled for breath, the pain in his midriff making him blind and a little sick. He rolled over and looked glassily at the deputy. His wild swing had caught Fry across cheek and temple, knocking the officer cold.

"Ed!" Long Sam croaked, staring at old Ed Scott.

The banker lay sprawled on his back, snowy hair matted with blood. Long Sam shuddered, snatched up his second gun, and got to his feet. His hat was gone but he wasted no time looking for it, reeling to the doorway and out into the bank. From outside came wild shouting and a sudden burst of firing.

"Masked men!" someone yelled. "They come out of the bank. Robbers! Bank robbers!"

Long Sam heard muffled shouts and dull thumping sounds that seemed to come from a huge vault behind the row of grilled windows, but took no time to investigate. He pounded down the bank floor on rubbery legs, almost falling when he jumped out to the steps. He saw four riders tearing east along the main stem, shooting back at doorways from which pistols and rifles flamed. The four mounted men wore slickers and masks, and one of them had a meal sack clutched under one arm.

Long Sam's guns lifted, and suddenly their double thunder hammered out along the street. He saw the man with the meal

sack lurch violently, start toppling backwards out of the saddle. But two other masked men pressed in, grabbing the fellow before he could fall. Then they were swinging off the street, streaking down across the meadow Long Sam had traversed getting to town.

"Good shootin', Slim!" an excited voice shouted.

Long Sam made no attempt to reply. He lurched down the steps, leaped into Sleeper's saddle, and threw the spurs to the old roan. The gaunt outlaw reloaded his guns as he rode, smoky eyes hard and narrow as he swept to the meadow and started across. He saw the four masked men approaching the timber along Horse Bayou. The wounded bandit was slowing the others down, for it took two of them to keep him in the saddle.

When the four masked men vanished into the timber, Long Sam bored straight on for another few moments. Then, judging that he had given the men time to ride down into the second bottom, Long Sam flung Sleeper hard to the right. He struck timber two hundred yards from where the masked men had gone into the bottoms, slowing Sleeper as he reached the first huge trees. He was looking back, watching the point where the four bandits had disappeared. He yelped in sudden astonishment, hauling Sleeper to a squatting halt.

HORSES were pouring out of the timber at about the point where those four masked fellows had gone into the bottom. The horses came boiling out into the meadow at a hard run, several of them squealing and kicking at brushy drags that had been tied to their tails. Off in the bottoms, Long Sam could hear other horses crashing through brush and whinnying as they scattered.

"Clever!" the gaunt outlaw growled.

“Those four bandits had a big bunch of horses, all shod, no doubt, cached down in the timber somewhere. They’ve scattered the broncs all directions, which would sure fog their sign.”

Long Sam put Sleeper on into the dense timber, riding down to the first bottom. He could still hear horses somewhere up the bayou, and rode with a six-shooter in his right hand and his eyes keenly alert.

“By grab!” the outlaw cried suddenly. “I just remembered that tough lookin’ gent with those two big canoes. What if those four bandits piled into those canoes and took to the bayou?”

Long Sam stretched up in the stirrups, watching the shadowy timber ahead of him more keenly than ever. He saw the huge old cypress log at last, slowing his mount to a cautious walk as he approached. Those canoes were no longer at the butt of the cypress log!

“Somethin’ tells me my bandits took to the water on me!” the outlaw growled.

He rode down to where the butt of the log stuck out over the water, smoky eyes sharpening when he saw boot prints in the loose soil. Then he saw blood smears on the butt of the log, and was about to dismount for a closer look at the sign when the faint sounds of shouting came in across the meadow.

“A pack of galoots headin’ out from town!” Long Sam groaned. “And Joe Fry will likely be with ‘em!”

The outlaw started up the bayou bottoms at a hard clip. He kept watching the placid waters of the bayou. When he swept around the second bend he saw the water rippling. Then he rounded the third bend, and a Satanic grin stretched his wide lips.

The two canoes were near the opposite shore, still held together by a ten foot length of thin hemp. A huge, pink-faced

man was in the bow of the forward canoe, paddling furiously. In the stern of the same canoe a slim, red-haired man worked a paddle feebly.

In the stern of the second canoe was the same big, dark man Long Sam had seen anchoring the craft at the butt of the old cypress log, earlier that morning. Sprawled on the canoe bottom, face down, lay a wiry looking man. Forward of the sprawled man were two saddles. Amidships of the first canoe were two more saddles.

“So that’s it!” Long Sam droned. “These buzzards had a band of horses hid out down here in the timber. They robbed the bank, raced back to the horses, and stampeded the animals, turnin’ their own mounts loose, too. Now if I could get close enough— Blazes!”

Long Sam’s voice ended on a growl of dismay. The huge man in the leading canoe had spun the craft’s nose into a narrow run of water that came out into the bayou from the opposite side. Long Sam groaned again when he glanced along that run, noticing that the heavy cypress and tupelo forests played out over there. He could see cane heads waving in a gentle breeze, and swore when he saw both canoes line out down that narrow run of water that went out into the bottoms and on into the tangled growth of cane.

“Pull a little bit, Zeke!” the huge man piloting the two canoes called out harshly.

“My side’s killin’ me, Mort!” the slim red-head behind him whimpered. “That Littlejohn hellion’s slug must have cracked a rib.”

“Quit whinin’, and do a little paddlin’!” the fat man rumbled. “How’s Ward makin’ out back there, Dan?”

Long Sam’s mind was racing, grasping and remembering those names. Old Ed Scott had spoken of a fat man named “Mort” Hadley. Scott had also said

something about Hadley having three toughs working for him named Dan Conklin, Zeke Wayne and Ward Potter. That the four men in those two canoes were Mort Hadley and his hirelings Long Sam did not doubt.

“Ward ain’t moved since I laid him in the canoe, Mort!” big Dan Conklin called. “Want me to see if he’s still breathin’?”

“Not now!” Mort Hadley’s voice reached out. “It ain’t far to them duck blinds. A posse will be hittin’ these bottoms any time. We’re supposed to be in Houston on business, so if we’re seen there’ll be hell to pay. Lean into’ your paddlin’, Dan!”

Dan Conklin hunched his powerful back and dug hard. Long Sam Littlejohn glanced around, thinking fast. Putting Sleeper into the bayou and swimming across to the opposite side would be of little help, even if he did not wind up bogging his horse in the ooze along one of the shores.

“Duck blinds over in that canebrake somewhere, eh?” he thought.

LONG SAM dismounted, watching the two canoes slide along to the wall of spindly cane, then disappear. He began moving around then, urged to nervous haste by the sounds of shouting far down the bottom. The posse from town had come to the spot where Mort Hadley and his men had scattered that bunch of horses. With a lot of excited fellows milling around, Long Sam guessed the chance of any of them ever figuring out what had happened would be nil.

“Ha!” the gaunt outlaw cried suddenly.

He raced to a huge pile of driftwood that high water had piled against a bunch of cypress knees. He began tearing away sticks and logs and brush, emerging finally with a battered door that looked as though it had once been on someone’s chicken

house. He carried the door down to the water’s edge, laid it on the bank, and hastily stripped, piling his clothing and guns on a mound of brush he placed in the middle of the old door. He eased the raft out onto the water, then waded in.

“Hope to gosh a bunch of those big crabs don’t decide to hang their claws into me!” he gulped.

Long Sam flattened out and began swimming as quickly as possible, pushing the crude raft ahead of him. He crossed the bayou and beached his raft at the mouth of the run up which the two canoes had gone. Then he stood on the planks and dressed, staring at the canebrake beyond the timber with mounting uneasiness.

“Even if I can wade out to wherever Hadley and his bunch have holed up in duck blinds, I’ll have to watch out for cotton-mouth moccasins and ‘gators!” he muttered.

Long Sam discovered that he could wade the narrow ditch without much trouble. But the shaggy tangle of cane on each side of him made him jump every time the wind rustled it. He kept a gun in each fist and watched the water constantly, expecting to meet an alligator or a cottonmouth at every second. He was in water thigh-deep and feeling his way along the oozy bottom cautiously when a heavy fish of some sort butted his shin, then flashed between his legs. Long Sam jumped and thrashed and made the water roar, barely choking back a howl of alarm.

“Listen, Mort!” a voice jarred out. “What’s makin’ all that fuss in the water, you reckon?”

“An alligator, likely!” Mort Hadley retorted. “Or maybe a big ‘gou our boats excited. Give me a hand with Ward.”

Long Sam crouched, almost bellying the water. The voices had come from just ahead, where the narrow opening he was

following through the walls of swaying cane turned sharply.

“Do gaspagou run up into this open water from the bayou, Mort?” Dan Conklin’s deep voice asked.

“I’ve caught scads of ‘gou right off this catwalk!” Hadley answered vexedly. “Shut up and get busy, can’t you?”

Long Sam crouched there and listened until he heard footfalls slogging away over boards that gave off a hollow sound. Then he waded slowly forward. As he eased around the sharp turn he saw open water ahead of him and halted, eyes raking a lagoon that would, he judged, cover about five acres.

Perhaps twenty yards from where Long Sam stood the two shiny canoes rode the placid lagoon, tied to a board catwalk that was nailed to stout cypress stakes. The walk was about two feet wide, and ran along the east side of the lagoon to a row of four hut-like structures that had board floors, with walls and roofs of cane cut from the brakes. Those little huts were duck blinds, used by hunters in fall and winter. In front of the first blind lay two of the saddles Long Sam had seen in the canoes.

“Hadley and his bunch won’t be expectin’ trouble here!” Long Sam chuckled. “So if my luck holds out, I ought to nab them before they know anyone is around!”

But Long Sam’s luck did not hold. Suddenly the canes behind him shuddered violently. He whirled, hearing a roaring splash. Then Long Sam was yelling and thrashing wildly backwards, goggling at a huge alligator that came streaking at him. The alligator swerved, splashing wildly again in its scramble to get into the open water of the lagoon.

“Now I’ve done it!” Long Sam gasped.

And indeed his yelling had done mischief. Huge, pink-faced Mort Hadley

and big burly Dan Conklin jumped from the nearest duck blind, goggling at Long Sam. Wiry, red-headed Zeke Wayne lurched out behind them, stripped to the waist, holding a wadded undershirt to a ragged bullet cut along his left side.

“Littlejohn!” Conklin roared. “Boss, that son follered us here!”

Mort Hadley and Zeke Wayne jerked pistols, firing the moment the weapons were clear of holsters. Long Sam slammed towards the end of the catwalk, blazing away with both guns. He saw Zeke Wayne spin, land in the lagoon with a geysering splash. A bullet ripped the top of Long Sam’s right shoulder, knocking him down in the water.

“Rush him, Mort!” Conklin bawled.

FEET BEGAN pounding and Long Sam shook water from his guns, smoky eyes wickedly cold. Then he heaved himself up and leveled his pistols, unconsciously humming a dirge through bared teeth as he cut loose. A bullet burned across his right arm, touching too lightly to spoil his aim. Another plucked at the wet cloth of his shirt collar.

Dan Conklin fell with a slamming wallop that threatened to wreck the catwalk. Mort Hadley tripped as if someone had roped his feet, bellowing at the top of his lungs as he sprawled out into the lagoon. Conklin rolled over and tried to sit up, but fell off the catwalk atop Mort Hadley, who was just surfacing. Long Sam sighed, crawled upon the catwalk, and stood there, dripping and panting.

“Hadley, you and Conklin swim towards the first duck blind!” he ordered.

“My leg’s nearly broke!” Conklin spluttered.

“Start swimming!” Long Sam snorted, and smashed a bullet into the water beside Conklin’s head.

The big bandit dived. He came up

swimming strongly, heading towards the catwalk. Mort Hadley followed, wallowing heavily in the water and cursing at every walloping stroke of his thick arms. Zeke Wayne had hold of the catwalk before the first duck blind. He hung limp and ashen, blood welling out of a clean puncture at the base of his neck. Conklin and Mort Hadley pounded up and grabbed the catwalk near Wayne, glaring balefully as Long Sam sloshed up.

“Come out of that blind, Potter, and join your pards!” Long Sam called.

“Ward Potter is dead, you meddlin’ whelp!” Mort Hadley rumbled.

Boots scraped on dry boards, then bantam-legged little Ward Potter staggered out to the catwalk. He was chalky white, and tried to say something. But his knees bent and he pitched down on the walk, moaning in pain as he put a hand to his right shoulder.

“I thought he was dead!” Mort Hadley said lamely.

“You’re a liar, fat boy!” Long Sam snorted. “You hoped I’d take your word for it and Potter would twist a slug into my back. What was the explosion and fire, back in town?”

“Explosion and fire?” Hadley sneered.

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about! But you’ll wish—”

Hadley’s voice was drowned by the roar of the six-shooter in Long Sam’s left hand. The fat man screamed, rolled backwards into the water, and went out of sight. He bobbed to the surface promptly however, grabbing the catwalk with his left hand, while he cupped his pudgy right hand over a bullet nicked ear. Hadley’s face looked like a huge mound of fresh dough.

“What was that fire and explosion?” Long Sam asked coldly.

“The Acme docks!” Hadley gasped.

“You had that barge company blasted,

then fired, so’s everyone would rush out of town!” Long Sam gritted. “That gave you and these other three rats a fairly safe swipe at the bank. But your main purpose in makin’ the bank holdup play was to murder Ed Scott, wasn’t it?”

Before Mort Hadley could reply there was a shout behind Long Sam. He whirled, crouching over lifting guns. Then the gaunt outlaw straightened up, a glad smile on his lips. Old Ed Scott, a white bandage around his head, came splashing out of the drainage ditch. Behind Scott came a big, grizzled man who had a scattergun in his hands and a shiny badge on his vest.

“It’s all right, Sam!” Ed Scott called. “The fellow with me is Bob Gossard, Little Boggy’s marshal.”

The marshal and Scott scrambled to the boardwalk, then came trotting forward. Long Sam looked down at the three men dangling in the water, and thought he had never seen three more frightened men in his life.

“I found Sleeper over across the bayou, Sam,” Scott panted. “Then Bob and me saw that henhouse door you used for a raft to get across the bayou and took a swim ourselves. You hurt much, son?”

“I’m nicked a little, but nothin’ serious,” Long Sam chuckled. “And I’m mighty glad you and the marshal followed my sign over here. The loot from your bank will be in that duck blind there, I reckon. This ought to get Mort Hadley years enough in the pen to keep him from makin’ you any more trouble, too!”

“Hadley and these other three hellions will hang!” the old banker said grimly.

“What are you talkin’ about?” Mort Hadley growled. “Even if you fiddle around and get me sent up for robbin’ your bank, you’ll be doin’ well.”

“Guess again, Hadley!” Marshal Bob Gossard grated. “Someone saw Guy Spee and Tony Madlin, two of your flunkies,

sneakin' away from the Acme docks just before those explosions wrecked the place. I picked Guy and Tony up, and they've confessed that you hired them to blow up the Acme docks. Three Acme employees were killed in those blasts and the fires that followed. That makes the charges murder!"

"And I hope a jury hangs them!" Long Sam growled. "But watch them, while I get ropes off the saddles, yonder. I want to get back to Sleeper and scoot yonderly before that Fry pest sights me again."

"Don't worry about Joe Fry!" the big marshal chuckled. "He's locked up in my jail."

"Jail?" Long Sam cried.

"That's right, son!" Scott laughed. "Fry was in my office, remember, holdin' a gun on me as well as you, while my bank was robbed and my employees were locked in the vault. Add to that the fact that Fry has been herdin' with this Hadley crook for the past two months and you can see that I've got a right to demand that Joe Fry be held and questioned, even if he is an officer of the law."

"Joe Fry won't be pesterin' you for several days, at least, Littlejohn!" Marshal Bob Gossard chuckled.

"What are you buzzards up to, anyhow?" Mort Hadley bleated. "I don't know a badge-man or anybody else named Joe Fry!"

"That dude who has been callin' himself Jim Nelson around town is actually Joe Fry, a deputy United States marshal, Hadley," Long Sam said gruffly. "What kind of a deal did you have cooked up with him?"

"That blasted dude!" Hadley groaned. "He got to hangin' around me and the boys, hintin' that he had a big deal on. He wouldn't say what his deal was."

"If I'd knowed he was a badge-man when I busted into old Scott's office to smoke him, I could have give Fry a dose of lead, too!" Zeke Wayne croaked.

"Let's gather this bunch of crooks and head for your *juzgado*, Gossard!" Long Sam chuckled. "Seein' Joe Fry behind bars is somethin' I don't want to miss. Maybe he'll think twice before he euchres me into ridin' the whole length of another long river to fall into one of his traps!"