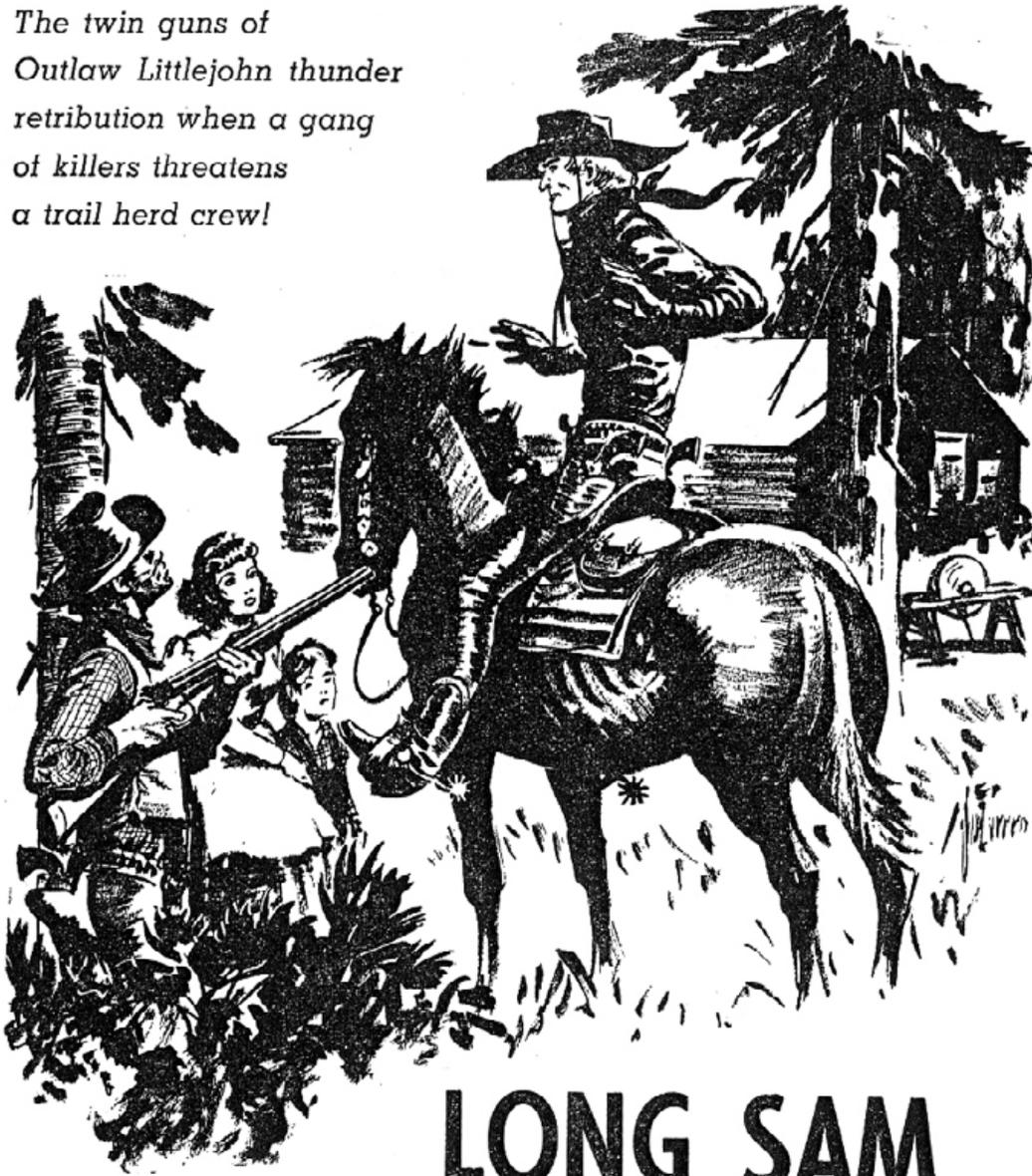


*The twin guns of
Outlaw Littlejohn thunder
retribution when a gang
of killers threatens
a trail herd crew!*



LONG SAM Mooches a Meal

By Lee Bond

THE house was as forlorn looking as the ragged hills that hemmed it in. But it was not deserted. That fact comforted Long Sam Littlejohn considerably. He put his ugly roan gelding, Sleeper, down a scarred ridge towards the house and other buildings. Long Sam was shaky from hunger, bone-

weary from long riding. Yet as he approached this place here in the lonely hills of Texas, there was the wariness of the hunted in him.

"Smoke comin' from the kitchen chimney, chickens around the barnlot, milk cows in that littlest pen," Long Sam mused.

All Long Sam wanted at the isolated ranch was a bait of grub for himself, grain for his horse, and a little rest. What he got was a startled look down the twin tubes of a scattergun, and a hide-scorcher of a cussin' from a bat-eared little hombre who hopped out of a brush patch and threw down on him.

"Black duds, from the boots on your big feet to the hat on your head!" the scrawny man sneered. "And black guns aprongin' out of black holsters on your legs. A badman right out of the back-country, now ain't you?"

Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam had the uneasy feeling that this vile tempered little galoot would blast him full of whatever kind of shot the shells in that scattergun held if he happened to recognize him. And there was always a grave danger of Long Sam being recognized by total strangers. Joe Fry, a deputy United States marshal who worked out of Austin, kept the country liberally sprinkled with big "wanted" posters which bore Long Sam's name, picture, full description and a list of the various crimes he was supposed to have committed.

"Pile off that ewe-necked, rat-tailed thing you're usin' for a hoss!" the angry man behind the shotgun said. The gun didn't waver.

Long Sam's bony face went blank, but not from amazement. A trace of color splashed across his prominent cheekbones, and his smoky eyes pinched in slowly as he swung a long leg up and over the cantle, dismounting smoothly and without haste.

"You own this ranch?" he asked levelly.

"I own it!" the bat-eared man snarled. "But you knowed that, just as you know I'm Harvey Cassel."

HARVEY CASSEL'S squinty dark eyes were too bright, too jumpy in their sockets. The man would shoot, and on little provocation! Long Sam started to remark that he had had no slightest idea as to who owned the ranch, but stopped when he saw a woman and a small boy come running towards him.

"Harvey, what are you doing?" the woman cried out.

Cassel cursed. Long Sam smiled and touched his hat, noting the hollow-eyed, gaunt-cheeked look of the woman. She had curly black hair and very large, very blue eyes, and Long Sam guessed she would have been mighty attractive if sickness or something had not left her so frail.

"Dottie, take the brat and get back to the house where you belong!" Harvey Cassel ordered harshly.

The woman seemed not to have heard. She had glanced up at Long Sam. He saw something like revulsion in her suddenly widening eyes.

"Long Sam Littlejohn, the outlaw!" she gasped.

"What's that?" Harvey Cassel yelped.

"Gollies, Mommie, Mr. Littlejohn don't—uh—doesn't look mean, does he?" the little boy piped up.

Long Sam felt as though a fist-sized lump of ice had formed in the pit of his stomach. Harvey Cassel was leaning forward over the scattergun now, whiskery face kinking into a wicked grin.

"By dingoes, Dottie, you're right!" Cassel cackled. "This string bean sure is that Littlejohn owlhoot. Think of the foldin' money I can git for *his* dead carcass!"

"Harvey, please be reasonable!" the woman begged. "This man you've captured is a notorious outlaw and killer. But shooting him down when he is not resisting you in any way would be cold-

blooded murder. Take Long Sam Littlejohn to Saddle Hill and hand him over to Sheriff Grover Hobey.”

“I’d get my throat cut by Littlejohn before we had went a mile towards town!” Harvey Cassel glared at his wife. “Less two months ago, I heard the Hooper boys offer that baby-faced Wes Hardin pistolman five hundred cash dollars to hunt Long Sam Littlejohn up and shoot him. Wes give Bill and Ott Hooper both a cussin’, and told them Littlejohn is one man he hopes he never has to tangle with. Think I’d take any chances with a feller that even Wes Hardin is scared of?”

“Wes Hardin isn’t afraid of me or any other man who ever drew the breath of life,” Long Sam put in calmly. “It’s a wonder he didn’t do worse than cuss Bill and Ott Hooper for tryin’ to hire his guns.”

“Shut up, and start unbucklin’ them pistol belts!” Harvey Cassel sneered. “By this time tomorrow, I’ll be knowed all over Texas as the fire-eatin’ hombre who smoked down Long Sam Littlejohn.”

“Harvey, your last scheme for making easy money was that vicious trick of forcing cattle drivers to hand over so many head of stock from each herd that crossed our Skimpy Creek holdings,” Dottie said gravely. “You’ve realized absolutely nothing off that scheme since it got going good, although Bill and Ott Hooper are making a fortune from it. But murder this outlaw for the reward you can collect, and you’ll be into something really bad.”

“Don’t try sassin’ me!” Cassel glared at his wife. “Bill and Ott Hooper strutted in and taken over when I was decent enough to cut the tricky sons in on my Skimpy Crick cattle deals, sure they did. But I’ve been tellin’ you that pair couldn’t chouse me into the culls that way. Bill and Ott Hooper are the same as dead ducks, right now.”

“What have you been up to?” Dottie

asked shakily.

“Littlejohn won’t be alive to talk, and you and the brat know you’d get a quirtin’ if you did.” Cassel laughed wickedly. “So I’ll tell you what I’ve did, girl. I set the Vigilantes onto Bill and Ott Hooper!”

“No!” Dottie wailed.

A WIDE grin creased the face of the man.

“Danged tootin’ I did!” Cassel laughed.

“But what did you tell this Vigilante about the Hooper boys?” Dottie was white to the lips now.

“I told a certain feller that Bill and Ott Hooper have been lyin’ to the Vigilantes about how much money they make!” Harvey Cassel growled. “If a man around here wants to get his neck stretched, just let him hold out on the amount of protection money he’s supposed to pony up to them Vigilante whelps.”

“Harvey, I’ve warned you that you’d go too far!” Dottie gasped. “And I think you have. I believe Bill and Ott Hooper are actually the heads of those murderous nightriders who call themselves Vigilantes!”

“Quit spookin’ at shadows and get on to the house with that kid!” her husband snarled. “You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Your wife happens to be dead right, Cassel,” Long Sam spoke calmly. “Bill and Ott Hooper are the head men of the local highbinders who call themselves Vigilantes.”

“Who told you the Hooper boys head them hooded Vigilantes?” Cassel asked uneasily.

“No one told me,” Long Sam replied. “I’ve been skulkin’ around these hills for ten days, checkin’ up on Bill and Ott Hooper. I’ve listened in on two secret night meetings they held with eight other

men, who act as lieutenants in their Vigilante pack.”

Harvey Cassel’s narrow face turned white under grime and dark stubble. His eyes twitched uneasy glances at the thickets around him, and Long Sam saw his bony hand tighten on the scattergun in a convulsive way.

“The way the Hooper boys act, I thought Skimpy Creek belonged to them, and that they had built that brush and log fence across the valley,” Long Sam went on. “If you own Skimpy Creek, Cassel, howcome the Hooper brothers to be runnin’ that shakedown game, over there?”

“It was my idea, and I put up most of the fence and taken the first profits out of the deal!” Harvey Cassel growled. “Then ranchmen got to raisin’ their bristles about payin’ toll, and I seen I had to have help to collect. I cut the Hooper boys in on the business, and the dirty sons wound up eucherin’ me into signin’ a ten-year lease on the land. I thought the paper I signed was a partnership agreement. But it turned out to be a iron-clad lease, givin’ Bill and Ott Hooper the right to use Skimpy Crick basin for the next ten years.”

“You’re not the first man to lose his shirt in dealin’ with the Hooper brothers!” Long Sam said.

“Quit tryin’ to scare me!” the scrawny tough hollered. “And just why have you been up here, nosin’ around?”

“I’m ridin’ point for two thousand head of cattle that will be along here any day, now,” Long Sam replied.

“Whose herd is it and where’s it at?” Cassel countered.

“The herd is south of here, just how far dependin’ on how much time Ike Kagle and his Boxed K riders have been makin’ since I rode on up here,” Long Sam drawled.

“Bandy-legged old Ike Kagle is shovin’ another batch of his Boxed K stuff up this trail?” Cassel yelled.

“I see you remember Ike,” Long Sam growled.

“Danged tootin’ I remember him!” Cassel frowned. “He fetched a herd up this way three months ago. The old cuss got so ringy when he come to the brush fence across Skimpy Crick, the Hooper boys socked him double toll to learn him a lesson. That night, Ike Kagle and some of his cowhands slipped back and set the brush fence on fire.”

“And at dawn the followin’ mornin’, your local Vigilante pack raided Ike Kagle’s camp!” Long Sam grated. “Ike and his cowhands were caught in their blankets, and shot up so bad they couldn’t lift a finger when the hooded Vigilante rats drove off the Boxed K herd. Four of Ike Kagle’s cowhands died.”

“And Ike Kagle is fool enough to come back for more of the same!” Harvey Cassel snorted.

THE outlaw surveyed Cassel coldly before offering an explanation.

“Ike is back because I talked him into it,” Long Sam snapped. “When I heard what had happened and went to see Ike, he told me the story. Vigilantes raidin’ him for tryin’ to burn a fence that belonged to Bill and Ott Hooper sounded to me like the Hoopers had more than a slight acquaintance with your murderin’ Vigilante pack. So I talked Ike into makin’ another drive through here. I poked on ahead of the drive to snoop around, and found out that those two bull-sized, red-headed Hooper bushwhackers are actually at the head of the Vigilantes.”

“Harvey, you’d best go away for a while!” Dottie Cassel gasped.

“You hush!” her husband glared.

"Daddy is a ring-tailed wampus!" Eddie shrilled. "He's not afraid of the ol' hooded Vig'lantes!"

"Eddie!" the boy's mother cried.

"Maybe there's a little man-stuff ready to break through the sugar coatin' you keep wrapped around the kid, after all," Cassel remarked. "You get on to the house, Dottie. Leave the young un here. Seein' a man make cold meat out of a bounty-plastered outlaw might be good for Eddie."

"Harvey Cassel!" Dottie wailed.

She flung an arm about Eddie, whirled him, and started away. The boy was, Long Sam guessed, around seven or eight years old. He had curly black hair and bright black eyes, but looked very pale and thin, as though he had known recent illness.

"Dottie!" Harvey Cassel squalled.

Dottie began running with the boy. Cassel swore a sizzling oath, so angry he took two running strides after his scurrying wife before he realized what he was doing. He dug in his boot heels, trying to whirl and slant his shotgun up at Long Sam again. But the gaunt outlaw was already leaping, wicked lights dancing in his smoky eyes.

Long Sam grabbed the shotgun barrels and flung them upward. Harvey Cassel yanked both triggers, then jackknifed and flew backwards as if a horse had kicked him. He fell on one side, making ghastly sounds in his throat. Long Sam turned when Dottie and Eddie came racing back.

"No call for alarm, lady," he told her.

Long Sam turned, flung the shotgun he still held out into a thicket, then walked to Harvey Cassel. He pulled a pistol from a holster on Harvey's scrawny thigh, and threw it into a patch of brush. He took hold of Harvey's scrawny shoulders, intending to lift the man up.

But suddenly Harvey Cassel lunged, driving a thin shoulder into Long Sam's

face. The outlaw heard Eddie and Dottie both shouting excitedly as he crashed backwards in a jolting fall. He saw Harvey Cassel leap to his feet and head for the thickets like a frightened cottontail.

"Halt!" Long Sam yelled.

He flipped a gun from holster and blasted two shots at the sky. Harvey Cassel crashed into a thicket full-tilt, not even looking back. Long Sam grinned ruefully, replaced the two spent cartridges in the pistol, then stood up.

"Within the past few years, Mr. Littlejohn, a brusque little man who wears derby hats, neatly tailored suits and smokes fierce cigars, has visited this ranch any number of times," Dottie said slowly. "According to him, you're the most vicious person who ever drew breath. Yet you just let a man run away who planned to murder you!"

"That cigar-eatin' pup who has been visitin' your ranch is Joe Fry, a deputy United States marshal, who works out of Austin!" Long Sam growled.

"You know him, don't you?" Dottie's eyes seemed to twinkle, but Long Sam was not sure.

"I know him too well!" the gaunt outlaw muttered.

"You're not guilty of the crimes Mr. Fry charges you with having committed?" Dottie asked.

"I fought hooded terrorists the carpetbaggers installed as state police, right after the war was over," Long Sam said, and shrugged. "The carpetbaggers put me down on the books as a vicious killer and thief, and offered a fat reward for me."

FAR out in the thickets, Long Sam heard a horse start crashing noisily through brush. He frowned, glancing uneasily at the brush and timber that crowded up close to the ranch on all sides.

"That would be Harvey," Dottie Cassel spoke calmly: "He had not been home for two days and nights. He was evidently just returning when he saw and stopped you."

"And I'd better scoot out of here," Long Sam declared. "Your husband might have a rifle on his saddle."

"He's riding eastward, towards the hills," Dottie replied calmly. "Harvey will go over to Skimpy Creek, no doubt. He may try to talk some of the toughs Bill and Ott Hooper keep at the brush fence into returning with him to make trouble for you."

"Well, I sure had better ramble if Harvey is headin' for Skimpy Creek!" Long Sam exclaimed. "I talked too much in front of him. If the Hoopers find out Ike Kagle is pushin' this way with a herd, and that I've been up here snoopin', they'll gather their Vigilante mob and hit Ike and his boys when they're not ready for it."

"Why did you come to this ranch, Mr. Littlejohn?" Dottie put the question sharply.

"Because I was hungry," Long Sam answered absently, his mind on other matters.

"Hungry?" the woman echoed sharply.

"That's right," Long Sam shrugged. "I've worked on short rations for ten days, not darin' to kill game because I had to keep hid. Yesterday I ran clean out of grub."

"Peter Benson, my father, built this ranch, Mr. Littlejohn, and was always proud of the fact that no man was ever sent away from it hungry," Dottie said simply. "Dinner is almost ready, for I thought Harvey would probably be home today. Stable your horse, and come to the house, won't you?"

"Thanks kindly, lady, but I reckon I'd better push on south and meet Ike Kagle," Long Sam declared. "Tryin' to mooch a meal has already got me into a picklement,

I'm afraid."

"Please don't go, Mr. Littlejohn!" Dottie cried. "Eddie and I need your help badly."

"You and the boy need my help?" the outlaw asked, uncertainly.

"Those Vigilantes, Mr. Littlejohn!" Dottie replied nervously. "If the man to whom Harvey talked actually is a member of that terrible bunch, then those Hooper boys will bring their hooded assassins here, hunting Harvey."

"Judas!" Long Sam muttered, scowling. "I hadn't thought of that. How could I help you and Eddie, Mrs. Cassel?"

"By helping us get into Saddle Hill!" Dottie told him quickly. "I've friends there, who will take Eddie and me in."

"If those Vigilante devils came here, they sure wouldn't be careful where they threw bullets," the outlaw declared.

"Eddie and I have both been having malarial chills, all summer long," Dottie said gravely. "Keeping him in town until Doctor White can straighten him out is something I've wanted to do for months."

"Then why haven't you?" Long Sam asked.

"Harvey says there is nothing dangerous about chills, and has refused to let me take Eddie and remain in town," a Dottie said quietly.

"What's the matter with that husband of yours, anyhow?" Long Sam asked gruffly.

"I wish I knew," Dottie told him soberly. "When I married him, ten years ago, he was a jolly, easy-going person, Mr. Littlejohn. The war was at its horrible worst then, of course. But Harvey was all right until the war's end, and the carpetbaggers came with their swaggering and the thieving and bullying."

"A lot of people get along fine, as long as life poses no serious problems for them to face," Long Sam shrugged. "Are your

folks livin', Mrs. Cassel?"

THE woman shrugged her thin shoulders. "My father donned the gray and marched off to war at the very outbreak of it," Dottie said quietly. "He was killed in battle, six months after he left home. The shock of his death was more than mother could bear, and she was gone within a year's time."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Long Sam told her. "You and this little boy need someone to give you a hand until Harvey Cassel straightens up, that's sure. Haven't you any livin' relatives who might help out?"

"I've a brother, Steve Benson, who is four years younger than I am," Dottie answered. "Steve's in Austin, running a hay and grain business and making good money at it."

"Why doesn't that brother get himself down here and see what he can do to help you?" Long Sam was vexed, and sounded it.

"Steve had to leave the ranch, three years ago," Dottie replied, looking suddenly down at her slim son.

"Why did Steve have to leave?" Long Sam put the question firmly.

"He caught Harvey slapping me," Dottie replied, flushing. "Steve would have shot Harvey then and there if I hadn't stopped him. He left the ranch that day, saying that he simply could not trust himself around Harvey again."

"And no wonder!" Long Sam growled. "Well, with you and this youngster needin' a doctor's care, I'll give you a hand gettin' to town. Tell me where to find what I need, and I'll harness a team or buggy hoss when I take Sleeper to your barn to feed him."

"If getting Eddie to a doctor was as simple as just harnessing a buggy horse and setting out, Mr. Littlejohn, I'd have

been gone, long ago," Dottie told him gravely. "I begged your help because there is no horse on this whole ranch that can be ridden or put into harness, except a big gray saddler Harvey uses. We'll have to hook your roan to the single-horse buggy."

"Holy smokes!" Long Sam groaned. "Lady, this old Sleeper hoss of mine never had a stitch of harness on him in his life. He'd kick a buggy to splinters before he'd pull it a hundred feet."

"Oh, no!" Dottie moaned.

She turned so white Long Sam thought she was about to faint. He wondered uneasily just how ill the young woman really was, and decided that she was certainly in no condition to stand much more nerve strain.

"I'll get a buggy hoss somewhere, Mrs. Cassel," he said hastily. "Don't worry, now. We'll get Eddie to town."

"Thank you, Sam Littlejohn!" Dottie sounded as shaky as she looked. "Dinner will be on the table by the time you get your horse put up."

By the time Long Sam got Sleeper put in a stall and fed, he was wondering uneasily just how he was going to keep his promise to get Eddie to town and still reach Ike Kagle and the Boxed K herd in time to head off a surprise attack by the Hooper brothers and their Vigilantes. The outlaw went to the ranchhouse in rapid strides, seeing Dottie Cassel come to the back door as he approached.

"Dinner is ready, Mr. Littlejohn," she greeted him. "I couldn't choke down a bite if I tried, and Eddie is running a temperature and must rest. If you don't mind, I'll gather some things while you eat."

Long Sam found an excellent meal of black-eyed peas, hot cornbread, fried ham, freshly churned butter and homemade peach preserves waiting for him. He ate long and heartily, hearing Dottie Cassel

make small sounds deep within the big ranchhouse. When the outlaw could eat no more he rolled and lit a cigarette, a frown slowly gathering his thin yellow brows. With hunger appeased and the weariness of long riding somewhat lessened by quantities of black coffee, Long Sam guessed he should have been able to relax and try to rest. Yet tension was building up rapidly within him.

"I've tangled my loop by comin' here and gettin' mixed into this deal!" he grumbled. "That sick boy and his mother need help, and I couldn't refuse to give them a hand. But I ought to be pushin' south, quick as Sleeper rests a little."

Long Sam broke off, coming instantly to his feet. Dottie Cassel had stepped into the kitchen from the dining room. She looked at him levelly, flushed a little from hurrying about her task of preparing for the trip to town.

"Thanks for a grand meal, lady!" he smiled. "Now I'll keep my end of the bargain by gettin' a buggy hoss."

"But where will you get a buggy horse, Mr. Littlejohn?" Dottie asked worriedly.

"There are some farms in a valley west of here," he told her. "I saw them several times, lately. It's about five miles over there, sure. But Eddie needs a nap to help get that fever down. He can get that sleep while I'm goin' over to the farms and gettin' back with a buggy horse."

Long Sam walked down the room, took his black hat off a wall peg, and tugged it on firmly over a mop of thick yellow hair. Dottie Cassel was watching him as he turned to the door and went out. He squinted against the sun's harsh glare, muttering when he skidded on the top step. He had to plunge down to the second step hastily to prevent losing his balance. And that sudden leap saved his life!

SOMETHING hit Long Sam a wicked blow on the neck. He felt his legs buckle and went tumbling down the stone steps. He knew that a bullet had hit him, and was thinking that Harvey Cassel had circled back and cut him down. He heard Dottie's frightened cry inside the house, and wanted to yell a warning at her. But to Long Sam's astonishment he could neither move nor speak.

"That fixed Littlejohn, boys!" a deep voice boomed out.

Long Sam's mind felt strangely numb, although he understood each word he heard. He was lying face down in the yard, arms and legs spread wide. He heard Dottie cry out again, and knew that she came down the steps and knelt beside him. Then heavy boots were pounding the trail that led off towards the corrals.

Long Sam tried desperately to make his hands move towards holstered pistols. Bill and Ott Hooper were hammering down the trail towards him, wicked grins on their craggy faces, burly shoulders hunched above leveled guns. Dottie Cassel sobbed, leaning above Long Sam, a slim arm protectively across his motionless shoulders.

"Get away from that long-shanked son, Dottie!" Bill Hooper ordered.

Two more men came behind the Hooper boys, almost hidden by the hulking brothers. But Long Sam saw those other two clearly now, recognizing them instantly. They were Port Milton and "Chub" Keeler, a couple of renegade gunmen and stock thieves who had been riding high with the Hoopers for several years.

"Bill, you shot Sam Littlejohn down in cold blood!" Dottie Cassel wailed.

The Hooper boys and their two hirelings halted, spreading apart to glance down at Long Sam. His vision was fuzzy because his lids hung almost completely

shut, giving him only a narrow crack to see through.

"Look at the blood leakin' out of his skull!" Bill Hooper exclaimed. "Boys, that slug of mine done its work, after all. Dottie, step into the house. Me and Ott have got some bad news for you."

"Bad—news?" Dottie gasped.

"You're a widder-woman, Dottie!" Ott Hooper told her callously.

"What *are* you talking about?" Dottie gasped.

"Harvey is hangin' from the limb of a big tree, over yonder," Ott Hooper grunted. "That looks like the work of the Vigilantes. Harvey say anything about trouble with the Vigilantes lately, Dottie?"

"You vile beasts!" Dottie cried furiously. "You caught Harvey and hanged him!"

"Now what kind of crazy talk is that?" Bill Hooper scoffed. "Shucks, Dottie, us fellers was Harvey's friends."

"You're lying!" Dottie said savagely. "Bill, I know that you and Ott are the brains behind those murdering Vigilantes. Harvey told me this morning that he sent word to the Vigilantes that you two—"

She broke off. Long Sam did not blame her. The four faces staring down at her had pulled into bitter lines. Port Milton, a slim, sallow man with shiny black eyes, cursed harshly and glanced at the two thunderstruck Hooper brothers. Chub Keeler shifted big feet, squaring his short, pot-bellied figure around to glance uneasily towards the corrals.

"Get up, and get into the house, Dottie!" Bill Hooper ordered gruffly. "You and Ott and me are goin' to set down, and have us a good talk."

"I've nothing to say to you two toughs!" Dottie retorted.

"Maybe you think that, but I think different," Bill told her. "Ott and me want

to hear everything Harvey spouted to you."

"And suppose I don't tell you anything Harvey said?" Dottie countered.

"I'll lay a quirt on that brat of yours if you get too stubborn!" Ott Hooper threatened.

Dottie jerked to her feet, a furious cry on her lips. Long Sam glimpsed her white face and widening eyes, and realized that Dottie was thoroughly frightened as well as angry. The young woman whirled and went up the stone steps fast, big Bill Hooper crowding her heels.

Long Sam had his own troubles just then, however. His nerves were coming to life again, and he had the feeling that red-hot needles were being shoved into every inch of his skin.

"Port, you and Chub fetch up the hosses," Ott Hooper was ordering gruffly.

"What about Littlejohn's carcass?" Port Milton asked.

"Drag him off to that shed, yonder," Ott Hooper grunted. "Whatever you find on him is yours to split."

He turned and stalked away, the sound of his heavy treading loud on the stone steps, then diminishing as he went into the ranchhouse. Long Sam held his breath when Port Milton and Chub Keeler began tugging at him, getting hold of his ankles and arms.

"I wonder if them two know what they're doin'?" Chub Keeler grumbled.

"Quit yappin', and get hold of Littlejohn's feet!" Port Milton snorted. "Before we busted Harvey Cassel's neck for him, he told us the truth about Littlejohn bein' here at the ranch, anyhow. Maybe the fool didn't know Bill and Ott head the Vigilantes. Or maybe he did, and sent Lon Buckley to them with that string of stuff about them holdin' out on the Vigilantes just to see what would happen."

“Whatever the deal was, Bill and Ott ought to have sweated Harvey a hour or so, instead of just stringin’ him up quick!” Chub Keeler grumbled. “Now they’ll have to thump Dottie and that kid around to find out what Harvey could have told them if they’d waited. And I don’t like—”

CHUB KEELER never finished saying what he did not like. He had hold of Long Sam’s ankles and was straightening up. Port Milton had a loose hold on Long Sam’s shoulders, tugging as Keeler lifted. Without any kind of warning, the gaunt outlaw suddenly flounced violently, spinning completely over, ripping loose from the hands of the men who had hold of him.

Chub Keeler opened his mouth to yell, but Long Sam’s heels slammed into his pudgy middle with all the sinewy power in the outlaw’s legs. Keeler went backwards, moaning in pain. Long Sam came to his feet, a six-shooter in each fist, blood flying from his dripping neck wound. He whirled, smashing a gun solidly across Port Milton’s astonished face. Milton dropped like a shot pig.

Long Sam staggered to where Chub Keeler was rearing up. Keeler’s face was purple as he fought for breath, but rage blazed at Long Sam from the man’s eyes. Keeler had a six-shooter out and was trying to tilt the barrel when Long Sam hit him across the skull with a pistol.

“Now if I can slide into the house and get the Hooper boys bayed, maybe I’ll get out of this scrape without losin’ any more hide!” Long Sam groaned.

He went towards the back steps, his legs rubbery under his weight. Blood was spilling down his neck and across his shoulders and shirtfront. He pushed his left hand Colt into holster as he staggered up the steps, lifting trembling fingers to the back of his head. There was a deep gash

just below the base of his skull.

“An inch higher, and that slug would have churned whatever I’m usin’ for brains!” the outlaw muttered.

The moment he got into the kitchen, Long Sam heard Dottie Cassel’s voice. She was somewhere beyond the big dining room, a mingling of fear and anger making her voice shake. Long Sam pulled his second gun and went into the dining room, smoky eyes hard. He saw that a hallway ran just beyond the dining room, and heard Dottie’s voice coming from the vast living room across the hall.

“Eddie is ill, I tell you!” Dottie was saying now. “Bill, surely you and Ott have a little manhood about you. Stop threatening this sick child, won’t you?”

“They don’t scare me, Mommie!” Eddie shrilled.

It was the meaning of the open-handed slap Long Sam heard, more than Dottie’s protesting scream, that sent him plunging across the hallway into the vast living room, guns jutting from his bony hands. Across and down the huge room he saw Dottie Cassel cowering on a deep sofa, her slim arms protectingly about Eddie. The youngster’s stubby nose was bleeding a little and he looked scared, although he was not whimpering. Bill Hooper was bending over Dottie, swearing at her as he tried to jerk her arms from about the youngster. Ott Hooper stood watching.

“Quit actin’ like a fool, Dottie!” Bill Hooper was growling. “Eddie sassed me, and any kid that sasses growed up men needs slappin’.”

“Work ‘em over and quit talkin’ about it, Bill!” Ott said. “Or step out of the way and let me at them.”

Twisting, trying to keep Bill Hooper’s big hands from taking firm hold on her arms or shoulders, Dottie suddenly spied Long Sam. He saw wonderment and hope flash in her eyes, and started to hurl a

challenge at the Hoopers, thinking surely Dottie would give his presence away. But Dottie did no such thing. She drove a foot into big Bill Hooper's middle with such force that he was flung back violently. Dottie leaped up then, Eddie still in her arms. She plunged around the end of the heavy sofa and dropped behind it.

"Shoot them, Sam!" her voice rang out.

"What in blazes!" Ott Hooper bellowed. "There ain't nobody else here."

OTT HOOPER had glanced uneasily around as he talked. His voice shut off as if a noose had tightened on his corded neck. He made a raspy throat sound that jerked Bill Hooper's glance around, too. They stood there for a long second, goggling in disbelief, mouths hanging open.

"You Hooper boys were buckin' such terrible odds, fightin' Dottie and her sick baby, that I thought I'd better give you a hand," Long Sam droned.

The Hooper brothers should have lifted their hands and counted themselves lucky for the chance. Experienced gunfighters would have done so. But Bill and Ott Hooper were not gunmen. They were killers, yes—killers of the most cowardly sort. They had never fought without a mob at their heels to give them staggering odds. They looked at Long Sam Littlejohn and saw him only as one man, foolishly pointing guns at them instead of having shot them down from behind, as they would have treated an enemy.

"Looks like you're slippin', Bill!" Ott Hooper grunted. "That slug you throwed at Littlejohn cut his head, but he ain't hurt much."

"Sam's got his mad up, too!" Bill Hooper chuckled.

The Hooper boys were edging cautiously apart. Long Sam's grin became

Satanic. As the Hooper brothers moved apart his gun-filled hands spread, one gun following each of the burly killers.

"Guess we better get to crawlin', Bill!" Ott Hooper jeered.

"Yeah, we better start hollerin' for mercy, brother," Bill laughed. "All we've got to do is—*nail him!*"

The last two words were a roaring shout of mingling triumph and gloating. The Hooper boys grabbed pistols from holsters at their hips, and their grins were wide and wicked as the six-shooters hissed from leather. Then pistols flung thunder into the room, the shots fast and close-spaced, the blinding roar of them knifed through by hoarse screams of pain and fear and shock. The floor jarred when men fell, and the roaring shots ceased.

Dottie Cassel shot upright behind the sofa back, wide eyes sweeping Long Sam Littlejohn. He stood there, a smoking gun in each hand, the anger leaving his face and eyes. Eddie's face came into view, and the boy grinned at Long Sam. At the gaunt outlaw's feet Bill and Ott Hooper lay sprawled, their craggy faces white and drawn.

"My hands, Littlejohn!" Bill Hooper croaked. "You shot both my hands, through and through."

"Ott's Colt hooks got a dose of the same!" Long Sam retorted.

"We're safe now, Eddie and I," Dottie Cassel said almost gently. "My brother will return home, Sam. Some day, I hope I can find the words to tell you how grateful I am for what you've done."

"Bill and Ott won't bother us no—uh—any more, will they, Mommie?" Eddie asked.

"You can be sure they won't, son!" Dottie told him happily.

"We'll help Mr. Littlejohn string them up, won't we?" the youngster asked eagerly.

“That won’t be necessary, sprout!” Long Sam smiled at the boy. “The law will hang these two, along with a lot of other rotten devils who belong to their Vigilante pack.”

“Prove that we’re Vigilantes, then talk about hangin’ us!” Bill Hooper sneered.

“That’ll be simple enough, now that I’ve nailed you two,” Long Sam retorted.

“Big talk!” Ott Hooper snorted. “But how do you figger to prove Bill and me are Vigilantes?”

“Some time tomorrow, I’ll hit the brush fence over at Skimpy Creek where you two have been robbin’ stockmen of cattle for toll charges,” Long Sam said. “When I land on that tough bunch you two have staked out over there, little old Ike Kagle and thirty-odd fightin’ cowhands will be backin’ me. When that struttin’

bunch of yours finds out that you two are already nabbed, plenty of them will be willin’ to talk. You two, and at least some of your Vigilante lieutenants, will hang for murderin’ four of Ike Kagle’s cowhands the last time he drove through here!”

Bill and Ott Hooper got on their feet, scared half out of their wits. Long Sam flipped his guns from holsters, and the two burly rascals cowered, whimpering in fear when the guns leveled at them.

“Eddie and I will find ropes, Sam!” Dottie Cassel said quickly. “You just keep an eye on these two.”

“Good girl!” the outlaw said. “We’ll soon be on the way to town. I saw a wagon out by the corral, and I’ll make these Hooper whelps pull it if their saddle hosses refuse!”