

An Owl-Hooter Deals Out His Own Brand of Justice to a Brutal Gang of Homesteader-Baiters!



*Two black butted guns throbbled a deadly thunder*

# LONG SAM FIGHTS FOR NESTERS

By LEE BOND

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THE thing was so utterly unreal, so damnably cruel, that for many minutes "Long Sam" Littlejohn sat his horse there on the oak-covered ridge, doubting his own eyes and sanity. Outlawed, with two thousand dollars in cold cash offered for his yellow-thatched scalp, Long Sam had seen enough of the seamy side of life to be almost shockproof. But out yonder in that sunlit little valley beyond the ridge a thing was happening which held the outlaw spellbound.

Long Sam's long, bony face was a little pale, and his smoky gray eyes were

beginning to kindle with grim, hot lights. From Stetson to dusty boots, the gaunt outlaw was dressed in comber black. The hand tooled belts which spanned his flat middle were jetty black, yet bright with the fat brass cartridges which filled their loops.

The holsters snuggled low on the outlaw's lean thighs were ebony hued, showed the careful hand tooling the belts had, and were filled with a pair of big, black butted .45s. The saddle beneath Littlejohn was also of jetty leather, beautifully hand tooled, with silver guards on the square skirt.

Long Sam shook his head, and the breath ran from his hard lips in a long, whistling sigh.

"I'm seein' it, yet damned if I believe it, Sleeper hoss," he said in an awed tone.

Sleeper, Long Sam's big, knobby-kneed, rat-tailed, hammer-headed strawberry roan horse shifted great, splayed feet, snorted uneasily, and rolled little pig-eyes back towards his master. Sleeper looked like something ready for the glue factory—and was soundly cursed by every law man in Texas. That big roan could outrun any horse that Texas badge toters had ever set after him, and had worn the tail off more than one ambitious posse.

The gaunt outlaw's keen eyes were focused on the people below him, and he was counting under his breath, counting those straggling, stumbling people who plodded doggedly along the little creek.

Behind the wearily plodding people rode two men, long, black whips flashing out from their hands now and then to lift and hurl some poor, stumbling devil forward into the staggering line. Another rider rode at right flank, and a fourth rode on the left. Those two men at the sides carried the same sort of long, snaky whips their mounted companions held.

As Long Sam watched, the man on the left flank reached out with the whip, knocked a spindly-looking boy spinning. Then he rode at the youngster who rolled into the lee of a small bush barely in time to escape being trampled.

**T**HE hellion over on the right flank of the staggering human herd slashed down at a stumbling ancient who had a long white beard and hobbled along on a crude crutch. The old man fell under the whip blow, and the man lifted the pliant lash, cracked down again and again at a slender woman who rushed to the oldster's aid.

The woman reeled under the savage blows, and for an instant the plodding column of walking people stopped, milled pitifully, as if to come to the woman's aid. But the other three whips began a devilish snarling and snapping, and suddenly Long Sam Littlejohn was cursing through set teeth, slamming spurs to the ribs of his big roan.

Long Sam had counted nine women, six men, mostly old fellows, and eight children in that miserable party of driven people. His big, bony hands dropped down to the black-butted guns at his thighs, and as Sleeper skimmed along the grassy hillside a slow, dismal tune came humming from between the gaunt, smoky-eyed outlaw's big white teeth. And those who knew Long Sam Littlejohn even passably well would have bet long odds then and there that raw hell was due to pop before many more minutes.

The outlaw found a ravine, and rode quietly down it. When he stopped the big horse in a thicket of saplings a few minutes later, he was within twenty yards of those helpless people who stood or sat about the old man and the girl who was tending him.

Long Sam slid down from the saddle, and the humming in his throat softened, became a sort of whining growl. He saw the tear-stained faces of women turned his way, and watched the drooping heads of beaten men lift.

Then one of the riders reached out, snatched at a girl who stood close by. She was small and slender-looking, at the leggy stage of being neither a grown woman nor a child. She screamed piercingly as the big, broad-shouldered man lifted her, laughing at her kicking and struggling.

"Yuh're purty as hell, Lucy." The big heller's voice was taunting. "But stop yore damned kickin' and clawin', or I'll bash in that purty face o' yores. Hell, ain't yuh seen by now that you and yore damned

nester friends can't buck the Looped Y? Hold still, yuh little she-devil, and give old Pronto a kiss. You and me are gonna git—"

A hoarse, blasting roll of gun thunder drowned the gloating voice of "Pronto." The big hellion dropped the girl, a panther squall of terror bursting from his lungs as he flung up both hands, clapped them to blood-spurting, mangled things that had been his ears but a moment ago. Pronto's horse whirled with him, and his bulging eyes found the gaunt, grinning man standing there, smoking Colt in each big knobby fist.

Pronto's three companions had whirled, and their voices lifted in a ringing howl of anger. Their hands drove down, and Long Sam Littlejohn's smoky eyes turned as cold as new ice when he saw guns slithering up out of leather. The gaunt owlhooter hummed that doleful tune—and from the level of his hips two black-butted guns throbbled a deadly thunder.

A little, rat-faced, squinty-eyed hellion began gagging, spitting blood as he rocked over forward, shot through the neck. A long-built gent who was as ribby as a half starved coyote screamed like a stuck pig, clapped both hands to his bullet-torn stomach and laid the hooks to his uneasy horse, dying in the saddle as the bronc roared away along the valley.

**T**HE third gent who had reached for hardware thought better of it, and swore in a blasting snarl. He was a short, barrel-chested specimen, with the flat-nosed, bulging-jawed face of a bull ape. His little, close-set green eyes began bulging slowly out of their sockets, and his broad, crooked lipped mouth sprung open.

"Gawd, Pronto, that—that's Long Sam Littlejohn!" the apish fellow roared. "Steady, or he'll kill hell outa us."

Pronto's broad, heavy features went a little grayer, and his round, ugly black eyes

bulged out a little further. Pronto jerked blood-drenched hands from his mangled, spurting ears, and clawed at the bright Texas sky with shaking fingers.

Long Sam Littlejohn caught the spiked hammers of his guns under crooked thumbs, and his chill eyes mocked the shaken pair who were in reaching as high as their arms would be stretch.

"Yella," he spat at them. "Quit them saddles like yore britches was on fire, and belly down on the grass. Move, yuh lousy sons, or I'll rip yore middles with bullets. I'm gonna give you two a dose of somethin' that won't taste good."

Long Sam had placed the two hellions by the time they had crawled shakily down from their mounts and flopped face down upon the cool, green earth. The big, black-eyed jasper was Pronto Pardee, gun-swift ramrod of Ab Yocum's vast Looped Y. The other man, the short, apish hellion who lay stretched beside big Pronto Pardee, was Kirk Winton, a notorious killer whose guns were always for hire.

Long Sam saw that the two were under control, and reloaded his hot black guns. He holstered the weapons, stalked over to the two prone men and stripped weapons from their holsters, ran practiced hands along their flinching bodies, feeling for hideout guns. He took a wicked bowie-knife from a sheath between Kirk Winton's blocky shoulders. From inside Pronto Pardee's shirt came a stubby, double-action belly gun that had been tucked into a specially made scabbard.

Pardee's ears were still streaming blood, and the big hellion was grunting from pain and uneasiness. Long Sam reached down, tucked the point of Winton's razor-keen knife beneath the greasy band of Pronto Pardee's shirt and ripped the garment from neck to belt line. Pardee reared up, cursing in alarm, trying to whirl over sideward. Long Sam smashed

him solidly behind one bleeding ear with a big knotty fist, grinned a hellish grin when Pardee kissed the earth with a resounding thump.

Long Sam ripped the undershirt from the big devil, tore the two slit garments from the man's feebly twitching arms. Pronto Pardee lay there naked to the waist, his vast, powerfully muscled shoulders tossing restlessly under the sting of the Texas sun.

Long Sam turned then to Kirk Winton, and caught the apish fellow trying to crawlfish. Long Sam set a huge, booted foot down hard on the back of Winton's thick, unwashed neck, and began slashing at the gun-hawk's shirt and undershirt with the gleaming bowie blade. Winton squalled hoarse oaths and fought like a wildcat. But Long Sam stripped him to the waist, leaving the man's hair-matted shoulders and arms turned up to the sun.

"Keep that face down in the dirt, Winton," the gaunt outlaw rasped coldly. "The sight of yuh is enough to gag a buzzard. Don't look up, or yuh'll butt a bullet."

LONG SAM turned then and strode calmly toward the huddled, awestruck people who stood beside the little creek. Something reached deep down within him, wrenched at his heart as he glimpsed those white, drawn faces from which sunken, dull eyes stared out at him in hopeless wonder. Men and women and children were there before him, most of them sick from suffering, all of them showing the undeniable marks of whips.

It was the slender girl who had been sitting beside the gaunt, white-bearded old man who came forward at last. Her gingham skirt and the petticoats beneath it were torn to shreds, hanging in ragged wisps about her slender legs. Long Sam felt a rage boil like liquid fire through his veins

when he saw the bloody marks across the girl's arms. He glimpsed white flesh through torn sleeves—flesh that was welted and cut and bleeding from the punishing whip-lash that had fallen mercilessly upon her.

"Thank God, you came in time!" The girl's voice was like a hollow echo. "My grandfather is very old, and lame besides. They would have beaten him to death if you had not come, Mr. Littlejohn."

Long Sam was used to having total strangers speak his name. Huge "Wanted" posters dotted most of the whole Southwest—posters which carried his picture, a written description of him, and all offering two thousand dollars to the bounty-hunting citizen or badge-toting lawman who could kill or capture him.

The outlaw was not surprised now to hear this slender girl call his name. He reached out, put great, powerful hands upon her small shoulders. He turned her carefully, and raw hell brewed in the heart of Long Sam as he looked upon the blood-stained dress which covered the girl's back. The dress had been whip-cut across the shoulders, and Long Sam saw ugly red gashes there in the soft flesh. His hands were shaking upon the girl's shoulders as he turned her slowly about, looked down into her pain-dimmed gray eyes. .

"Yuh're mighty plucky, little lady," he said calmly. "Most folks would be whimperin' and sick from the hurts yuh've got. Yuh're a thoroughbred, Miss."

"I'm thinking only of Gramp, and these other poor people," she said softly. "Long Sam Littlejohn, can't you help us escape?"

"Likely." Long Sam nodded gravely. "But first I'll have to know what's what. Howcome you people bein' herded like cattle through the hills? Where yuh from? Why was the Looped Y devils tormentin' yuh?"

Long Sam's voice had lifted. He had

turned, too, so that he might watch the two prone and sweating Looped Y hellions who were there just beyond him. And now those beaten, ragged folks, men, women and children, came crowding about Long Sam, talking to him in hollow, frightened voices, begging him to help them.

The white-bearded old fellow whom the girl had called her grandfather came hobbling forward on a homemade crutch. His lean old face was dead white above the beard, and his sunken eyes burned with rage.

"I'm Fred Turner," the oldster shrilled. "Most folks call me Pop. This is my gran' darter, Evelyn Turner. This is—"

**N**AMES beat at Long Sam's ears, names that meant nothing, names that barely reached through his concentration. He nodded, took proffered hands, muttered a greeting now and then. But Long Sam was more interested in the misery he read in those sunken eyes, and in the problem of why these people were in their present condition. Then, too, Long Sam was thinking of Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal.

Somewhere along Long Sam's back trail that little, hard-eyed officer was smelling out his sign. Joe Fry wore a stiff derby hat, button shoes, and store clothes. With a stub of cigar eternally clamped in one corner of his steel-trap mouth, the deputy looked more like a drummer than one of the most famous and most deadly manhunters in the west. If Joe came along—

"And now, as to why we're here," old Pop Turner shrilled. "Them dad-blasted Looped Y hellers struck us jest at daylight this mornin', Littlejohn. We—left near a dozen dead layin' there at our homes. They was women and little children kilt along with men folks."

"Hold on, Pop," Long Sam cut in sharply. "Where did this happen?"

"In Green Valley," the old fellow choked. "I taken a colony into Green Valley a year and a half ago, son. We settled there, built our homes. Some ploughed up fields, planted grain and sich. Others stocked cattle. Then Ab Yocum come bustin' in a month ago, said he wanted the country for to run his Looped Y stuff on. Claimed he was expandin', and told us to git out or git kilt."

"And we stayed!" a woman screamed. "We stayed, and this morning I saw my husband and—and our four-year-old son die when those fiends roared into our yard, shooting at us. If we hadn't stayed—"

"Lottie, please don't!" A gray-haired little woman said softly, and took the sobbing, shuddering young widow in her arms.

Something rose in Long Sam's throat, choking him, making the blood swell and rush and pound along his veins.

"We've got to go back down there, Littlejohn," old Pop Turner mumbled. "We can't leave our dead a-layin' there for the varmints to—"

A half dozen choked sobs from the men and women caused the oldster to break off.

"We can't go back!" the slender little girl Pronto Pardee had tried to maul sobbed. "If we go back, Mr. Turner, those riders will come again. And they'd kill us all this time—kill us like they killed my daddy and my mother this mornin'."

"Don't worry, little lady," Long Sam said in a strangely thick tone. "We're goin' back to the homes yuh folks own. You six men kin shoot guns, can't yuh?"

Old Pop Turner nodded grimly. The other five men, three of them grizzled and already wounded, nodded slowly, doggedly. The two others were younger men, and obviously brothers.

"Our daddy was shot in the back down there this mornin', Littlejohn," one of the brothers said hoarsely. "Dick and me, we

wanted to stay and fight it out then and there. But Pop Turner said we'd only bring death to more women an' kids, which was true. Yuh kin bet yore life, Littlejohn, that Dick and me'll do some shootin'."

"Bueno." The gaunt outlaw nodded. "You folks are wore out, so set down and have a rest. And while yuh're restin' for the hike back home, I'm gonna put on a little show. Ever see the game of dog-eat-dog? No? Well, jest take ringside seats and watch close. The game is right interestin'. Especially, when yuh've got two of the slimiest, most cowardly two-legged dogs that ever tromped over the good clean earth."

THE outlaw turned, strode a few paces to the left and picked up one of the long, wickedly pliant blacksnake whips. He saw some of the children among the beaten nesters cower instinctively, and cursed softly under his breath when one tow-headed little lad covered his already whip-welted face and screamed in terror.

Long Sam strode up to Kirk Winton, prodded the apish hellion to his feet, and thrust the short, hickory stock of the whip into his hands. Long Sam slithered swiftly back, and there was a cold, hard grin on his mouth. He deliberately drew each big, black-butted gun, and eared the spiked hammers back to full cock.

"Back off a few paces, Winton," Long Sam hummed. "Git off jest the right distance, then start takin' the hide off'n that thing there on the ground. Whip Pardee till he begs for mercy. Whip him, or I'll shoot chunks out of yore carcass till yuh'll look like the woodpeckers had been at yuh . . ."

Pronto Pardee, who had beaten women and children and helpless men with a whip that day, was caving in. Blood streamed from a dozen gashes on his massive back, chest and sides. He was on his feet, whirling in blind, crazy circles, screaming

for mercy, begging. Tears ran down his face. His eyes were bulging, beginning to glaze.

Long Sam watched the whip cut Pardee once more, then flung up one gun-filled hand. Kirk Winton, chalk-white, shaking if he were chilling, dropped the whip and stood panting there in the hot sun, sweat running in long, hot streaks down his greasy, hair-matted torso.

"He made me do it, Pronto!" the apish cutthroat croaked. "I didn't want to. But the eyes of that long-gear—"

"You, Pardee!" Long Sam rasped, and the Looped Y ramrod stopped, to stand sobbing and shaking, staring murderously at the coldly grinning outlaw.

"I'll kill yuh for this!" Pronto Pardee croaked. "Havin' me hosswhipped 'fore these damned, gawkin' nesters. Littlejohn, I'll kill yuh for this."

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," Long Sam hummed. "Anyhow, it's yore turn now. Go git that whip and start workin' yore friend Winton over. Do a job on him, Pardee, or I'll let him at yuh agin."

Pardee whirled with a snarl, his bloody body crouching as he darted toward the whip. Kirk Winton squalled hoarsely, whirled, and started running. Long Sam's right hand Colt boomed thunderously and the squat hellion sprawled face down upon the grass, squealing in terror. Long Sam's slug had blasted the heel from Winton's right boot, tripping him. And before the man could gain his feet Pronto Pardee was within range, sobbing oaths as he brought the whip snarling forward.

The beaten nesters watched in grimlipped silence, and Long Sam sat humming that doleful tune. Pronto Pardee was using that blacksnake whip like an expert, and Kirk Winton's screams were like the cries of a cougar-caught colt. Blood was appearing in bright, red trickles along Winton's shoulders and back and belly.

The apish hellion rolled and threshed madly, trying always to get beyond the whistling lash, but failing miserably.

LONG SAM glanced over to where the little, rat-faced tough he had neck-shot lay limp and dead. A hundred yards or so down the valley the gaunt, ribby devil Long Sam had shot lay sprawled and lifeless, his horse standing patiently beside him. Long Sam brought his glance back to the whipping bee, and saw that Kirk Winton was ready to cave in.

"All right, you two!" Long Sam barked. "The party's over. Yuh're gonna hoof it back to the valley where yuh raided these nesters and murdered their kin. How you two yella bellies like the feel of a whip by now, huh?"

The pair were white-lipped and glowering, ready to slit each other's throats if given half a chance. But Long Sam reloading a chamber in each big gun, gave the pair no chance to fight. He walked down to them, made them stretch face down upon the cool grass once more. Then Long Sam caught up the three saddled horses which stood beyond and led the animals back to the grief-numbed nesters.

"The ones of yuh that are least able to walk kin crawl aboard these broncs," he said quietly. "Pop Turner, you ride one of the hosses. This little girl, here, kin ride the saddle in front of yuh. And here's a boy that ought to be able to set back of yore saddle."

Long Sam spoke in clipped, crisp tones, and the nesters obeyed his commands. And when the gaunt outlaw turned away, each of the three horses carried three passengers. The men and stronger women would have to walk, yet Long Sam was not satisfied. Down the valley yonder was another saddler, which meant three more people could ride. Long Sam drew one of his famous guns, shoved it into the hand of a

short, grim-lipped little man who had sharp gray eyes.

"Keep an eye on them two battered things out there, *amigo*," the outlaw called. "Kill the first one of them that tries to make a break. I'm going after my hoss."

Long Sam turned on one heel and hurried across the little valley to the oaks where he had left his bronc. His mind was badly upset over this thing he had come upon, otherwise he would never have blundered straight into the thicket as he did. He was usually as cagey as a lobo, and twice as hard to trap.

But for once Long Sam was not thinking of his own troubles. Not until he had come up to Sleeper, and was reaching out for the trailing reins, did he realize that he had made a bad mistake. A low, gritty laugh jarred against his ears, and a little, derby-wearing gent who chewed a frayed cigar butt stepped out of deep shadows with a cocked and leveled gun.

"Elevate, Sammy!" Deputy Joe Fry said coldly. "Start reachin up, long feller, or I'll put a slug in yuh. It's been a long trail, Sam. But all trails have to end some place. Goin' in feet first, or do yuh aim to lift them hands like I said?"

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DESPITE the fact that he was handcuffed and jail-house bound, Long Sam Littlejohn heaved a sigh of relief when he topped a little ridge, dropped beyond it. The morning sun was already an hour high, and that ridge shut off Long Sam's view of the wrecked homes in the fertile breadth of Green Valley.

Long Sam would never forget the night he had spent down there in that valley, helping gather up men and women and children who had been killed by a greed-mad pack of hellions who drew pay from Ab Yocum. The heart-broken sobs of those left living, and the set, dead faces of the victims of those ruthless raiders were

things the gaunt outlaw would not soon forget.

Deputy Joe Fry, riding beside Long Sam, looked drawn and tired. His mouth was a little tighter than usual, and his chill gray eyes were squinted, hot slits. Joe Fry had figured on taking three prisoners down to Rio Dulce town this morning. He had meant to fetch Kirk Winton and Pronto Pardee along, and turn them over to the sheriff at Rio Dulce.

Pardee and Winton had been locked in a stout granary, while the badge-toter and Long Sam helped those heart-broken nesters gather their dead. But when the little deputy went to the granary around sunup to get Pronto Pardee and Kirk Winton he found them swinging from the granary's beams, hanged by lengths of barbed wire.

"Yuh got any idea who hung them two devils last night, Sam?" the little officer asked suddenly.

Long Sam's smoky eyes stabbed at the deputy. "They got cold feet and committed suicide," he said flatly. "Yuh human bloodhound, ain't yuh got any decency a-tall? If yuh was to go hintin' that mebbe—"

"Button yore lip, yuh long-gear'd hunk of orneryness," Fry cut in. "Far as any report I make is concerned, Pronto Pardee and Kirk Winton took their own lives. I'll sorta forgit to mention to the sheriff that them two hung theirselves while their hands was tied behind their backs. I took the ropes off their wrists. The sheriff might git to wonderin' if he found a couple gents hung like that."

Long Sam smiled slowly. "I reckon yuh ain't as ornery as I figured," he said quietly.

"Sam, that was the damnest thing down there I ever seen," Fry gulped. "Lordy, but the night I put in will haunt me for a year. That wasn't jest plain shootin' an' killin'. It was a massacre."

"And the dirty, two-bit hellion responsible for it is runnin' free," Long Sam rasped through locked teeth. "Peel these handcuffs off me, Joe, and pass me my cutters. I'd admire to ride over to the Looped Y and have a powwow with that Ab Yocum. He was in on that raid hisself, for a half dozen of them nesters recognized him."

"Noble thoughts, long boy," the deputy grunted. "But nothin' doin'. I'm goin' after Ab Yocum right now. We pass his place on the way to town."

"What?" Long Sam exclaimed. "Say, Joe, this ain't a time to joke. All yuh kin do is report Yocum. He—"

"Remember that little general store of old Pop Turner's back there?" the deputy cut in. "Well, Pop had a dinky little post-office in one corner of that store. Yocum and his bunch killed the clerk that was makin' up the mail, then set fire to the store. The mail and all was burned. So Uncle Sam wants Yocum and his bunch now, feller."

"But yuh'll need a posse," Long Sam grated.

"Shut up, and ride," Fry grunted. "We're gatherin' Yocum on the way to town."

THE lanky owl-hooter argued hotly, yet Joe Fry only grunted at him. And not until they were halting their broncs before the great arched gateway of the huge Looped Y ranchhouse did Long Sam cease his pleading and arguing.

"Git down, now, and keep that trap of yores shut," Joe Fry ordered grimly. "I'm no fool, Sam. I'll git Yocum off guard, then throw down on the dirty—"

Ab Yocum appeared on the great, shaded porch. Yocum was a slim, wiry man, dressed in the most expensive clothes money could buy. He cocked his sleek, black-thatched head to one side, and his rust-colored eyes were keenly alert as he



glanced at Long Sam, then at the officer. Ab Yocum's mouth was like a thin, red knife wound against his sallow skin, and his small, tapering hands fluttered close to the tails of his neat gray coat.

"Long Sam Littlejohn, I believe," he said in a low, soft voice. "And wearing handcuffs. The gentleman behind you is an officer?"

Yocum's thin black brows arched, and a satanic smile tugged at his hard red lips.

"I'm Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal, from Austin," the little badge-toter said wearily. "Got me a tough prisoner here, Yocum, and I'm headin' him for jail. But I'm wore out, and wondered if yuh'd feed me and Littlejohn."

Relief, quick and heartfelt, flashed in the rusty-red eyes of Yocum.

"To be sure, officer," he said in that soft, purring voice. "Step in. Glad to oblige. You—er—which way did you come?"

Green Valley lay to the east. Joe Fry scratched his head, scowling as if hard put to answer.

"We come in down past them big blue hills back yonder," he said finally, and pointed north. "I'm sorta turned around, Yocum. Git along inside, Littlejohn. I'm shore hungry."

Long Sam stepped through the door but did not miss the new relief that flooded Yocum's eyes. A moment later they were in a great, richly furnished living room.

"Have any trouble with this fellow, Littlejohn, here?" Yocum asked.

"Nah," Fry grunted. "Ketched him nappin'. They all slip sooner or later—all crooks and killers."

Long Sam saw Ab Yocum stiffen, saw a sharply alarmed something flash into Yocum's queerly colored eyes. But at the moment three men came stalking into the room—three hard-eyed, gun-hung hellions who scowled openly at Joe Fry.

A moment later two more came in, and Long Sam shot a quick, guarded look toward the deputy marshal. He saw an uneasy frown crease the little badge-toter's brow, and saw Fry squirm around in the deep chair he had taken, no doubt getting his holstered gun into a more handy position. Then Long Sam caught the look on Ab Yocum's face, and every nerve in his gaunt body seemed to freeze. Ab Yocum was grinning like a wolf, and there was a bitter, hateful something in his eyes.

"Why did you lie to me when I asked you which direction you came from, Fry?" Yocum's voice was like a whirr of a diamondback's rattles.

**J**OE FRY went beet red, levered to his feet.

"Sit down," Ab Yocum said thinly. "Those five boys down the room yonder have orders to kill you if you so much as bat an eye. We know, Fry, that you and Littlejohn, here, spent the night over in Green Valley, helping pick up a few nesters who got—ah—hurt."

"We know even more than that," a sullen-eyed, fat-paunched hellion down the room sneered. "Me and Luke, here, was out on the ridges yesterday and seen you and Littlejohn herdin' them damned nesters back to their shanties. Yuh had two of our men prisoners, along with Littlejohn."

"Where are Pronto Pardee and Kirk Winton, Fry?" Ab Yocum snapped. "Don't try any more lies. You'll never leave . . . Here, you damned snake! Keep back, or—"

Long Sam Littlejohn was used to betting his life on thousand to one shots. His agile brain had weighed this situation accurately and swiftly. He knew that he and Joe Fry would both be shot down like trapped coyotes within the next few seconds. Long Sam also knew that he had a thousand to one chance to save his own

skin and give the plucky Fry a hand to boot.

Suddenly he was diving forward, manacled hands outflung, a prayer upon his twitching lips. Those manacled hands were reaching for Ab Yocum, and Long Sam was driving forward with all the power in his lean, flat muscles.

Yocum whirled backward, clawing at the twin guns beneath his coat tails. Long Sam got hold of the little hellion's right wrist, kept that gun from springing up. But Long Sam's hands were linked close together, and he could not reach Yocum's left hand in time.

The Looped Y owner squalled shrilly, twisting and cursing wildly as he flung the left hand Colt down, triggered. Long Sam felt the hot blast of powder on his face, and knew that the slug cut flesh across the top of his shoulder. But he wrenched mightily at Yocum's right wrist, and heard the brittle snapping of thin bone. Yocum's bawl of hate became a sob of pain, and the dandified little killer sagged, sweat oozing from his face, knees shaking, buckling under his weight.

Long Sam snatched the fallen gun, ripped the other from Yocum's left hand. Then the gaunt outlaw was up, whirling, grinning coldly as he hummed that doleful tune. Guns were coughing their hoarse thunder, and the big room was swiftly becoming a leaping, throbbing hell.

Long Sam felt a slug fan his jaw, and ducked as another snicked through his thick yellow hair. Then he was feeling Ab Yocum's guns bounce in his palms, and heard the long, wailing yell of a man hard hit.

The owl-hooter shifted, cursing because he had to keep his guns held so close together. He missed a couple of times, then got the hang of shooting from such an awkward position. He dropped another man and brought a screeching yowl from a

third. And even as he shifted and weaved and hunted for human targets down that smoke-choked room, Long Sam had time to wonder what had happened to Joe Fry.

The outlaw's face was a twisted, bloody mask now, for a slug had torn his forehead, opening the skin almost to the bone. He shook the blood from his eyes, and the dirge came humming more loudly from his gleaming teeth.

**H**IS guns bucked, and down the room a man died with a gurgling, wheezing moan. Long Sam felt a bullet burn his side, and located the fifth man who was hunkered beside a huge chair. The gaunt outlaw fired right and left, and saw one of the killer's eyes become a blood-spurting black socket.

The killer sprawled out into the floor, and Long Sam stood there, weaving, guns moving slowly right and left. A couple of the devils he had downed were moaning feebly, clawing at burning wounds. But they were out of the fight, perhaps dying.

Long Sam turned, and saw Ab Yocum getting to his feet, a look of wild desperation in his red eyes. Long Sam shuttled forward and smashed that fallow face with a single, swiping blow of a Colt barrel. Yocum dropped soundlessly, and Long Sam turned, found Joe Fry sprawled there beside the big chair.

The little deputy was beginning to mumble, and his head was rolling. Blood trickled from a shallow groove across Fry's right temple. Long Sam dropped the guns he had used, searched frantically through the officer's pockets. A moment later he straightened, grinning as he gripped a tiny handcuff key between strong white teeth.

The outlaw was free a few moments later, and dragged Ab Yocum over to where Joe Fry lay. Long Sam linked Yocum's good left wrist to Joe Fry's right, then went down the room to see the two

wounded men. One of them had a smashed shoulder, and would live to hang. The other was already out of his head and muttering something about "kill all damned nesters" as he clawed at a bullet-punctured belly with bloody fingers.

That killer of women and children was headed for hell on greased skids, and Long Sam turned away from him, to drag the other wounded man down the room. The gaunt outlaw gathered up Joe Fry's gun and all the others that lay handy, and slid a pair into the holsters at his thighs.

"Here, yuh long-gear'd devil, what have yuh done?" Joe Fry yapped. "Yuh're under arrest, Littlejohn, so don't . . . What the hell!"

Joe Fry had discovered that he was lashed to the senseless Yocum.

Long Sam grinned at the fuming deputy, and patted the guns at his thighs.

"I'm runnin' the show now," he said grimly. "I'll tag along with yuh and yore two prisoners till I'm shore yuh're not apt to be jumped by any more Looped Y gunnies. Then I'll circle off into the hills some place and bed down."

"Uh-huh, I know how yuh'll bed down." Joe Fry grinned sourly. "Hell, I seen yuh rollin' yore eyes at that corral full of fine saddlers as we come up to this place. They are shore above the average hosses, Sam. How much yuh figger they'll bring per head down acrost the line?"

"About a hundred an' fif— Say, what yuh think I am, a hoss thief?"

Long Sam snorted, and busied himself with the wounded killer, while Joe Fry chuckled dryly.