



Long Sam's

SINGING SIX-GUNS

By LEE BOND

*Littlejohn chants a range dirge as his irons pound
out a death song for black-brained bandits!*

IN THE SECONDS it took him to fully wake up, Long Sam Littlejohn tried to tell himself that the roaring guns, snorting horses, and the woman's frenzied screams, were all a part of an unnerving nightmare. But by the time he was sitting up, blinking into the tar-black Texas night, he knew that those sounds were real.

He skinned into pants and boots, rolled

his blankets, and buckled criss-crossed, gun-weighted belts about his flat middle in a fraction of the time it would have taken the average camped-out cowhand to do it.

Littlejohn hesitated for just a moment, head canted in a listening attitude as he finger-combed heavy yellow hair before donning a Stetson that was as jetty black as the rest of his clothing.

Guns were still banging down this

deep, oak-shaded canyon where he had camped at sundown the evening before. The woman was still screaming, and the hullabaloo had drawn close enough now for Littlejohn to hear the screech and clatter of iron tires roaring over the canyon's rocky floor.

"A rig of some sort is bein' jumped by hoss-backers, from the sound of things," Littlejohn muttered.

He bent, tied his bedroll behind the cantle of the hand-tooled black saddle that had served him as a pillow. Then he was moving rapidly away through the night, carrying saddle, blanket and bridle, smoke-colored eyes watching for the little clearing where he had picketed the big, ugly roan gelding he called Sleeper.

Long Sam Littlejohn was cinching the saddle on his tough old roan when the crash came. He jerked erect, listening to the splintering wood, whinnying horses, and the triumphant whoops of hard riding men. The woman's screaming and the banging six-shooters stopped.

"That rig piled up," Littlejohn muttered, and swung aboard his horse. He walked the roan cautiously down-canyon beneath the heavy timber.

Men were shouting hoarsely, and horses were lunging and snorting at the spot where the rig had piled up. But Long Sam Littlejohn did not ride out there into the well-traveled road to see what was what.

OUTLAWED, with a cash reward offered for his capture dead-or-alive, Long Sam had to be almighty careful about venturing into the presence of other people. There was always the danger of running into a duly appointed peace officer. But worse yet was the danger of getting in gun range of the kind of fellow who would kill or capture any wanted outlaw simply for the cash involved.

"Quit yore saddles and spread out, yuh boneheads!" Long Sam heard a deep voice boom. "That blasted gal is hidin' around here some place, and the only way to find her is to start stompin' the brush patches. Pike'll skin us alive if we let her escape."

"How about that badge polisher, Harley?" a thin, sharp voice asked.

"He must have butted one of these rocks when the buckboard turned over," Harley's deep voice replied. "Anyhow, he's out cold. But you and Grat git a wiggle on, Buck. I'll give yuh a hand, quick as I finish hog-tiein' this Joe Fry whelp."

"Joe Fry!" Long Sam Littlejohn gasped the name, pulling his roan to a halt as a shock went through every inch of his gaunt, unusually tall body.

Joe Fry was a deputy U. S. marshal, working out of Austin. Fry was a stocky fellow, who wore button shoes, store clothes and derby hats. He generally had a cigar clamped in his steel-trap mouth, and looked a lot more like a successful drummer than the cold-nerved, deadly manhunter he actually was.

With but one exception, Joe Fry's record of always nabbing any wanted man he went after was perfect. That one exception was Long Sam Littlejohn, and the gaunt, towheaded outlaw felt constantly the threat of Joe Fry's fury.

"Ho!" Littlejohn said softly, and tightened his grip on the bridle reins when Sleeper grunted and began fiddle-footing.

At just about the same time, the familiar, buzz-saw voice of Joe Fry lifted out there along the road.

"I hear you blasted whelps millin' around, so answer me!" Fry fumed. "Who are you, and why did yuh stampede my team? Where's Thelma Howard? If you ridge-runners have caused that girl to get hurt I'll hunt yuh down if it takes me fifty years to do it!"

Long Sam Littlejohn's nerves were tingling sharply as he sat there, holding a tight rein on Sleeper. The ewe-necked, splay-hoofed old roan was an ugly tempered brute, and would kick, paw or bite any stranger that got within reach of him. And what that piggish grunting Sleeper was doing now meant that someone was close by. Long Sam made a guess as to who that person would be.

"Thelma, listen!" the gaunt outlaw called guardedly. "This is Long Sam Littlejohn. If yuh hear me, come here, and don't forget that this Sleeper hoss will bite or kick if he gets the chance."

"Thank heavens!" a shaky voice said, and Sleeper did his ornery best to lunge at a moving figure that came through the black shadows.

"Here!" Long Sam called, and reached down, touching the girl's shoulder.

Thelma Howard grabbed Long Sam's sinewy wrist, and with a single heaving motion he brought her up behind the saddle. "Get out of here, Sam, but do it quietly," she said, lips close to his ear. "I have to see a man in Los Robles, and quickly."

"I think I savvy, Thelma," the gaunt outlaw said drily. "You got quite a surprise tonight, eh?"

"What do you mean?" the girl asked sharply.

"You know those men who jumped you and Fry," Long Sam said bluntly.

"Do I?" the girl's voice was low, angry.

"You certainly do!" the outlaw snapped. "Harley Mitchell, Buck Drummond and Grat Flagg. They work for Pike Luther, the tinhorn gambler and second-rate crook who caused you to break with Matt Howard, your own father."

"Mind your own business, Sam Littlejohn!" the girl said coldly. "And get

this fugitive from a glue factory you call a horse started away from here. Drop me off at Los Robles, then go on about your business."

"Not so fast, Miss High-and-mighty!" Long Sam grunted. "I spend most of my time runnin' and hidin' and dodgin', so it'll be a pleasure to make somebody else do a little runnin'!"

BEFORE Thelma Howard could reply, Long Sam pulled a deep breath into his lungs, then lifted his voice in a hoarse, bellowing command that rang through the hills in rebounding echoes.

"Close in faster, boys!" Long Sam yelled. "I've got this young 'un of mine, so grab them yahoos who tried to kill her, before they get to their hosses and get away."

"Sam Littlejohn!" Thelma Howard gasped. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that was Matt Howard shouting orders."

Long Sam shushed the girl, listening to the startled cursing of Harley Mitchell, Buck Drummond and Grat Flagg. They were tearing through brush and over loose rock like spooked steers, yelling as if Old Nick, himself, was at their heels. Then three horses were roaring south along the road at a dead run, the drumming of their iron-shod hoofs fading rapidly.

"Why did you do a foolish thing like that?" the girl asked angrily. "I wanted to beat those three to town, and tell Pike what they had been up to."

"Isn't it about time, Thelma, that you woke up?" Long Sam growled. "Hasn't it soaked through that pretty head of yores that Pike Luther is a sneakin', double-crossing' rat of the rottenest kind, just as yore daddy tried to tell you? Is it pride that keeps you from admittin'— Hey, layoff that!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a sharp note of alarm. The girl had grabbed his

six-shooter in his right holster, slid it out before he realized what she was up to. He whirled in the saddle, groping frantically, hoping to seize her wrist. But suddenly the night seemed filled with clanging bells, roaring storms, and millions of bright-hued lights that danced and bobbed crazily.

Long Sam knew that his body struck the stony earth, but felt no pain. He heard Thelma Howard laugh mockingly, then the six-shooter she had slapped him silly with came plummeting down to thump him on the leg. Sleeper's big hoofs slapped the earth in a fast getaway, and Long Sam cursed groggily as he began trying to sit up.

Long Sam Littlejohn never knew whether it was two or twenty minutes from the time he was knocked off his horse until he got on his feet. He found his hat and gun Thelma Howard had slammed him with, holstering the gun with shaky hand, and cursing grimly when he pulled the Stetson on gingerly. There was a lump building up on top of his head that was throbbing, and the gaunt outlaw's tall legs still felt shaky as he started out towards the road where Joe Fry was cursing and shouting by turns.

"Shut up, Runt!" Long Sam called sourly as he approached the deputy. "I've got a headache, and yore hollerin' don't help it ary bit."

"You!" Joe Fry almost screeched in new rage. "Littlejohn, I had a hunch you would be in the gang of road-agents that Howard girl is bossin' here in this hill country."

"Shut up!" Long Sam growled, and began groping through the waist high bushes until he found a dead one.

He gathered an armload of dry branches, then moved back close to the sound of Joe Fry's voice, and started a fire. When the flame leaped up, cutting a

bright circle in the black night, the gaunt outlaw took in the scene through smoke colored eyes that were slitted and cold.

JOE FRY'S derby hat was dented, jammed down over his ears. The deputy was securely trussed with chunks cut from a lariat, and so angry his square-jawed, wide-lipped face looked white in the firelight. Fry's gray eyes were like molten steel as he glared up at the gaunt, black-clad outlaw who stood over him.

"Cut me out of these ropes, you paddle-footed, long shanked imitation of a human bein'," Fry snarled. "I savvy what happened, now."

"What did happen, Fry?" Long Sam asked, glancing at the twisted remnants of what had been a good buckboard until it smashed into a nest of big boulders.

"You and the rest of that Howard girl's bandit crew jumped me when I drove into this canyon with her!" the deputy gritted. "I got knocked out when the rig piled up, and some of you buscaderos hogtied me. That was you tryin' to imitate old Matt Howard's bellerin' voice a while ago, which was nothin' but a signal to the rest of your murderin' bunch that the girl had been picked up, and that it was time for the cutthroats to head for their hideout with her."

"That whack on the noggin must have scrambled what few brains you had, Runt," Long Sam said grimly. "I imitated Matt Howard's voice, shore. I done that to scare them three wallopers who were prowlin' around here, huntin' the girl. The way they took off ought to tell you that they was scared, too."

"Quit wastin' time and cut me out of these ropes!" Fry glared. "I wouldn't believe you on a stack of Bibles, and you ought to know I wouldn't."

"You had Thelma Howard under arrest?" Long Sam asked.

"Yuh know blasted well I did!" Fry howled. "In the six months since her daddy disowned her for wantin' to marry that snake-eyed Pike Luther tinhorn, Thelma Howard has led you, and the rest of the fools who take her orders, on a dozen or more raids against ranches, stage coaches, and gamblin' halls. You hellions have killed at least four men durin' those raids, and U. S. Mail was stolen in two of the stage robberies."

"Matt Howard and I have been friends since Thelma was a pug-nosed, freckled-face kid in pigtails, Joe," Long Sam said soberly. "Matt's a cattle king, and gave her everything she ever thought she wanted. Thelma's hot tempered, and as stubborn as any mule that was ever foaled. But she's not a thief, she is not vicious, and she certainly wouldn't lead a bandit gang."

"Horse tracks!" Fry howled. "That blasted girl has been recognized in every raid she's led you and the rest of her dirty bunch through."

"I got into this Los Robles country at noon yesterday, Joe, which is the first time I've been here in almost a year," Long Sam said sharply. "I came here because I'd heard these wild tales of Thelma Howard leadin' an outlaw band to hurt and humiliate her daddy, who disowned her for settin' out to marry Pike Luther. I know how this must be hurtin' Matt Howard, lovin' that girl of his like he does. I came here hopin' I could help Matt, and I think I can."

"Who do you think you're kiddin'?" Fry squalled. "That Howard girl has been recognized from the clothes she wears, the hosses and saddles she rides, even if she does wear a mask durin' her raids. Two months ago, she put two bullets through the brains of Tate Murvin, shotgun guard, when she led you in a raid on the Musket Creek-Los Robles stage. Old Hap Winthrop, the stage driver, seen her set

there in her saddle and blow Murvin's brains out for joshin' her about swappin' the strong box she told him to kick off the boot for a kiss."

"Hap Winthrop will swear, in court, that the bandit who murdered Tate Murvin over that joshin' was Thelma Howard?" Long Sam asked grimly.

"Of course he will!" Fry snapped. "Thelma had on a mask, and tried to disguise her voice by talkin' low and hoarse. But the little fool was ridin' a palomino that the whole country knows she's owned since it was foaled, and settin' a hand-tooled, gold-mounted saddle her daddy give her four or five years back, when she turned eighteen. Quit wastin' time, and cut me out of these ropes. Surrender without any fuss, and I'll mention, at yore trial, that you surrendered of yore own, free will."

"Fry, you're a swell-headed, double-crossin' liar!" Long Sam said harshly. "Any time there's a dirty crime that can't be solved, Johnny-on-the-spot, you start yellin' my name, and keep it up until every badge-polisher in the state follows suit. You've no doubt been shootin' off yore lyin' mouth around here, claimin' I'm part of the murderin' pack of bandits Thelma Howard is accused of leadin'. I'm sick of havin' you pull that kind of stuff on me, so lay there and rot in them ropes."

JOE FRY'S jaw sagged, and there was honest amazement in his hard eyes. He had rarely seen Long Sam Littlejohn even peevish, and never had he seen the gaunt outlaw so coldly angry as he was now.

"It's pretty easy to call me names when I'm hogtied, you long-backed son!" Fry retorted finally.

Long Sam Littlejohn stalked forward, squatted on his heels, and took a six-shooter out of a flap holster at Fry's right hip. The gaunt outlaw slipped the cylinder

pin out of the gun, then hurled the pieces of the dismantled weapon out into the brush. Fry cursed him wildly, but Long Sam only grunted, got on his feet, and strode to the wreckage of the buckboard to begin rummaging around.

Long Sam straightened up presently with a long, shiny Winchester in his hands, smoky eyes mocking as he listened to a new burst of furious cursing from the deputy marshal. Long Sam slid the barrel of the rifle into a narrow crevice between two big boulders, gave a savage wrench, then held the rifle up so Fry could see the badly bent barrel.

"You sneakin' wampus, you've ruined both my guns!" Fry ranted. "If I was out of these ropes, I'd— Hey, what are you up to?"

The deputy's voice was shrill with alarm as he finished speaking. Long Sam Littlejohn had drawn a stock knife from his pocket, opened a razor-sharp blade, and was stalking towards the deputy, bony face set in grim lines.

"Git away from me with that knife, you murderin' hellion!" Fry howled.

Long Sam snorted through his bony nose, flopped Fry over on his face, and slashed the ropes that held him. The outlaw pocketed his knife, seized a fistful of Fry's checkered coat at the nape of his neck, and stood up, yanking the deputy to his feet. He spun Joe Fry around, looked coldly down into his glaring eyes.

"You've got no hobbles on yuh now, so I'll tell you again that you're a mouthy fool, and that I'm sick of you accusin' me of every rotten crime that's committed in Texas," the gaunt outlaw said coldly. "I'm goin' after the outlaw gang Thelma Howard is supposed to be leadin', mostly because I want to help Matt Howard and his girl. But I also want to make a bald-faced liar out of you in the eyes of the people you've told that I'm a member of

that murderin' bunch."

Long Sam turned on one boot heel and strode away, going up the canyon toward a spot where he had been hearing horses snort and stamp for some time. That would be the team Fry had had hooked to the buckboard, the outlaw knew, and was hoping those horses had been broken to saddle as well as harness.

"Come back here, you crane-legged hunk of noose-bait!" Fry was yowling. "You're under arrest, Littlejohn."

Long Sam muttered between his teeth, hurrying into the black shadows beyond the firelight. He found the team only a short distance up the canyon, where dragging lines had fouled in thick brush, halting them. The horses were over their fright, and stood quietly while the outlaw approached. He hopped on the back of the first horse he came to, but hopped right off again when the horse squealed and started to buck.

"Ho, boy!" Long Sam soothed the frightened animal. "If you don't want to be rode, we won't argue about it."

He moved to the other horse, hopped on the harnessed back, and grinned when the pony offered no objections.

"Get away from that team!" Joe Fry was howling. "I rented them hosses, and if you steal 'em I'll have to pay for them, along with this buckboard you made me wreck."

"Keep yore distance, Runt, or I'll give you a thumpin' you'll remember a spell!" Long Sam warned. "Besides, I'm leavin' one of these ponies for you to ride, which ought to make yuh grateful."

Long Sam was grinning as he stripped the gentle horse of all harness except the bridle. He made reins from one of the lines, wishing he could stick around to see what happened when Joe Fry tried to ride the horse he was leaving for him.

But Long Sam had no time to dally

around, and knew it. He hopped aboard his bareback mount the moment he had the makeshift reins fastened to bit rings, and turned the horse out of the brush into the road. Joe Fry heard him leaving, and came rushing and stumbling through the thickets, cursing wildly and ordering him to halt.

LONG SAM swung his horse off the road, walked it up a long, rough slope, then took a crooked ridge that ran south and west through the hills. He pushed the pony hard, yet dawn was breaking when he reined in at the north edge of Los Robles. The outlaw slid to the ground, patted the sweaty shoulder of the slim little sorrel that had carried him down through the hills at a fast clip. He unbridled the sorrel, watched it trot away, knowing it would head for its home corral.

Los Robles was spread out on a flat at the mouth of a big canyon, with rolling, oak-clad hills marching down on it from the north. A sizable creek meandered past the town on the east, and on south and west were open meadows, with more timbered hills in the distance. The town was small but prosperous, since it was in the heart of a vast region where cattle raising, mining, farming and lumbering were carried on extensively.

Los Robles was a county seat, and Long Sam Littlejohn was wondering if keen-eyed old Sheriff Jerry King was stirring yet as he walked into town on foot. Smoke was coming from chimneys, men whistled and sang as they did barn chores while women folk cooked breakfast and off on the creek east of town a pack of deep-voiced hounds were telling the world they had treed themselves a varmint.

Pigs squealed and fought over feed that had been put into their pens, cows bawled plaintively for calves that were being hustled away after taking their share

of morning milk, and chickens were coming off roosts, flapping their wings and cackling as they started the day's search for grasshoppers and other insects.

Long Sam got behind the nearest of two rows of log and frame business buildings that faced each other across a broad, clean street. None of the establishments were open yet, and the gaunt outlaw guessed it would be a half hour or so before stores and the like opened their doors. He had traveled only a short distance behind the buildings when his eyes lighted suddenly, and a grin touched his lips.

Out in a grassy space well behind the business buildings, grazing despite trailing reins and the bit in his mouth, was Sleeper, his ugly old roan horse. Long Sam whistled softly, and the roan flung up a big, ill-shaped head that was supported by a scrawny neck that had a fuzzy, scraggly mane. Sleeper cocked a crimplly ear, rolled piggish little eyes at his master, and gave his ratty tail an angry switch.

"Glad to see me, eh, you old sinner?" Long Sam chuckled under his breath.

The outlaw moved swiftly on, smoky eyes somber as he studied the back of a two-story building ahead of him. Stout steps went up the east wall of the building to a square landing. A thick door that opened onto the landing was closed, but gave to Long Sam's touch when he climbed the stairs and tried the latch. The outlaw pushed the door open a few inches, peering cautiously into a broad hallway that was carpeted from end to end.

This building housed the Rainbow House, Pike Luther's ornate saloon and gambling establishment. Here, above the flashy saloon and gambling hall that occupied the ground floor, Pike Luther had built his living quarters. But if the slim, sallow-skinned, cold-eyed gambler was in his ornately furnished rooms now he was

certainly not stirring, for Long Sam Littlejohn's sharp ears could hear no sounds of any kind.

"Asleep, I reckon," the outlaw muttered, and gave the door a gentle push.

Long Sam flinched when one of the hinges on the door squeaked shrilly. He stepped inside, shut the door, and stood tensely alert, smoky eyes sweeping the various doors that opened into the hallway. When no one appeared he decided the squeaky hinge had not betrayed his entrance, and moved forward cautiously, his tread soundless in the thick nap of the carpeting.

"Lost somethin', Mister?" a hard but unmistakably feminine voice lashed out suddenly. Long Sam Littlejohn spun on the soles of his boots, and looked at the tall, blond woman who stood in a doorway that he had just eased past. She regarded him out of too-wise eyes, painted mouth kinking in a hard grin as she leveled a deadly little nickel-plated pistol at his middle.

"Bella Neal!" Long Sam forced a grin to his own lips.

"What are you snoopin' around up here for, Littlejohn?" the woman asked coldly.

"Snoopin'?" Long Sam shrugged bony shoulders. "I just opened the door and walked in, Bella. When did you quit Brig Colter's Purple Parrot, down yonder at Firefly, on the Rio Grande?"

"When I walked out on Brig and his river rat-trap ain't none of your business, noose-dodger!" the blonde retorted. "And don't change the subject again. I want to know why you come snoopin' around here."

Long Sam narrowed lids over his suddenly alert eyes. Bella Neal was strictly a lady of the night and should have been sound asleep at this hour of the morning. Yet she was wide awake, tense nerved,

and dressed, Long Sam decided, for travel.

"I wanted to see Pike Luther, Bella," he droned. "Me, I can't drop around at regular hours, so I sifted up here to have a word with Pike before Sheriff Jerry King gets curious and starts stirrin' around too lively."

"You're a liar, Sam!" the hard-eyed woman glared. "You come lookin' for that stuck-up Thelma Howard. But there's no time to talk, now. The fireworks will start any minute. You've stuck your nose in to somethin' you shouldn't have, and I warned you, so here's—"

THE WOMAN'S voice ended on a blast of profanity that would have made a muleskinner shudder. Long Sam Littlejohn had seen her hand tense, and knew that Bella Neal meant to shoot him down. He lunged, left hand closing over her hand and the nickeled gun it held.

The blonde cried out in pain when the outlaw's sinewy fingers bit down savagely. She let the gun fall, and kicked savagely at him from under the long skirt of the dove gray suit she wore. Long Sam seized her by the shoulders, yanked her out into the hallway, spun her around, and rushed her towards the far end of the hall.

"If I remember, this door goes into a closet that has mops, brooms and the like in it," he panted. "Step in, sister, and see if I'm right."

He had yanked open the narrow door to a small closet that was cluttered with mops, pails, brooms, dust-pans. He gave Bella Neal a shove, then slammed the door and twisted a key that protruded from beneath the knob. Bella kicked the door and called him names, but the gaunt outlaw grinned ruefully, pocketed the key to the door, and turned away, smoky eyes alertly watching the other doors that opened out into the hall.

Long Sam slid a six-shooter from

holster, fully expecting Pike Luther to come charging from some door along the hallway. He heard muffled thumping sounds issuing from the room Bella Neal had been in, and started forward, drawn gun leveled for quick action. But the gaunt outlaw had taken only a couple of steps when a six-shooter roared throatily down on the street somewhere, and men's voices were suddenly lifted in wild shouts.

In the few seconds Long Sam Littlejohn stood there, head canted, listening to the growing tumult down in the street, he remembered Bella Neal's remark that the fireworks would start any minute. That remark, coupled with the fact that Bella had been waiting up here, dressed for travel and apparently alone, sent Long Sam suddenly lunging towards the doorway that led out to the stairs up which he had climbed from the alley.

Long Sam was panting a little when he halted in the narrow, shadowy passageway between Pike Luther's Rainbow House and a log building that housed a hardware store. The gaunt outlaw's smoky eyes popped wide when he first looked out into the town's main drag. Then those smoky eyes were cold behind narrowing lids, and from the outlaw's throat came a softly hummed range dirge, a sure sign that Long Sam Littlejohn was fighting mad.

"Thelma Howard!" a man was shouting hoarsely, "She just shot Sheriff Jerry King. Her and her bunch have robbed the bank."

A Winchester whammed twice in rapid succession, and the shouting man grew silent. Long Sam's bony hands lifted those deadly, black-butted guns from holsters, and he was humming the range dirge more loudly as he stepped out upon the board sidewalk. Directly before him lanky Sheriff Jerry King lay face down in the street's deep dust, blood reddening the whole top of his grizzled head. The

sheriff's gunless hands were flung out before him, pointing, it seemed, towards four crouched, slow-moving figures that were coming from the front door of George Brule's bank.

Three of the figures coming from the bank's door were obviously men. They wore black masks, slickers that were fastened from the throat on down, and each man carried a cocked carbine. They were bunched up, crowding close to a slim, cool leader who wore a tight-fitting blue silk shirtwaist, tan riding breeches, a brown Stetson slanted low over a small face that was covered by a crimson silk mask, and had two thick braids of blue-black hair that hung down forward, waist length.

"Easy, men!" a hoarse voice called out in the hushed town. "We can't kill Matt Howard's girl, even if we have to let her and her bunch get away with our money. Mebbe we can take their trail—"

The voice, coming from inside a store building, ended abruptly when the six-shooter in the gauntleted hand of the girlish bandit spat two swift shots, smashing window glass.

"Thelma, me and a lot of other folks in tried to tell Banker George Brule and his daughter, Addie, that they was makin' a mistake by lettin' you live with 'em, here in town!" another voice shouted angrily. "Dad-blame it, Brule and that red-headed daughter of his will wish they had listened to sense, now!"

A titter of amusement came from behind the bandit leader's red mask, and the gauntleted left hand raised a bulky gunny sack, waving it mockingly at the unseen speaker, who was in hiding somewhere down the street. Then the girlish bandit leader was off the board walk, bounding into a hand-tooled gold mounted saddle that was cinched on a magnificent palomino stallion.

BUT JUST as the girlish figure of the bandit leader was settling in the fancy saddle, Long Sam Littlejohn's left hand six-shooter threw roaring thunder along the street. The palomino horse squealed, quit the earth in a mighty leap, and swapped ends while all four hoofs were out of the dust. With a thin yell of alarm the girlish bandit came tumbling down to the dusty street, while the bullet-blistered horse hammered away, riderless.

"Pike Luther, you and Harley Mitchell and Grat Flagg elevate!" Long Sam's voice roared into the wild shouts. "Stand hitched, or—"

The three slicker-clad bandits were darting toward waiting mounts, yelling oaths behind their masks. Long Sam saw one of them swivel, start lining up a cocked rifle. The gaunt outlaw's right-hand Colt bucked twice, and the squat, crouching bandit who had tried to fire at him flopped over backwards, rifle spewing skywards as he fell.

But those other two bandits were not idle. They suddenly whirled on Long Sam Littlejohn, rifles bellowing as fast as they could work levers and pull triggers. Long Sam staggered when a bullet ripped a gash across his left cheek, then lurched violently and fell off the boardwalk to the deep dust when a slug from the six-shooter in the girlish bandit leader's hand tore through his right thigh.

But out there in the street a burly, slicker-clad bandit was suddenly spinning around and around, gunless hands waving limply as life drained out of him. The third slicker-wearing robber suddenly threw away his smoking rifle, clamped both hands to his middle, and pitched over into the dirt, screaming in pain and terror until death silenced him.

Long Sam Littlejohn's smoky eyes and bucking guns swung without hesitancy to the girlish bandit who was now up,

backing frantically towards a lunging horse and reloading a powder heated Colt.

"Don't run off, Thelma, darlin'!" Long Sam taunted. "I hear you blew a man's brains out, a while back, because he asked for a kiss. I don't aim to ever kiss a poison-mean thing like you if I can help it. But stand still, you murderin' little hellion, or I'll let these ol' six-pistols of mine sing you a ditty that shore won't sound like a love song. Drop that gun!"

Long Sam Littlejohn had come to his feet as he talked. He was stalking toward the girlish bandit now, a gaunt, blood-smearred apparition with leveled guns and smoky eyes that were as cold as old ice. Feet pounded the boardwalks, and men were cursing in nervous tension as they rushed forward.

"Littlejohn, let the girl alone!" a man bawled. "Now that Thelma's gang is wiped out, we'll be able to handle her. Don't crowd the girl until she fights back, you fool!"

Long Sam heard the shouted advice, but his smoky eyes never left the crouched, terrified bandit who was trying desperately to reach a snorting, lunging horse. The girlish bandit had finished reloading the Colt, and suddenly the six-shooter blazed, throwing a slug that flicked through Long Sam's heavy yellow hair.

"Why, Thelma!" he mocked. "Is that any way for a nice girl to act?"

The girlish bandit screeched something, flung another shot at the gaunt outlaw. Then the deadly guns in Long Sam's bony fists were bucking, and the horrified townsmen were roaring in protest. The girlish bandit rocked and weaved and staggered, smoking gun spilling from limp fingers.

The diminutive outlaw was down in the street, huddled and forlorn, gauntleted hands clawing once at the deep, soft dust.

Long, black braids lay whipped out along the ground, and blood seeped out of the small body, staining the tan dust an ominous hue.

"Littlejohn, how in the name of heaven could you do a thing like this?" a choked voice asked. "Thelma was a bandit, shore. But shootin' down a girl—"

Long Sam holstered the guns he had reloaded, then lifted his somber eyes to the crowd of awe-struck people who had formed around him.

"Joe Fry, the famous deputy U. S. marshal from Austin, come in here a week back, and started spoutin' off about you bein' one of Thelma's crew," a stubby, bald-headed man glared at Long Sam. "Sheriff King passed out word, quiet-like, that Fry was talkin' through that derby thing he wears for a hat. I reckon the sheriff knowed what he was talkin' about, too, for you shore wouldn't have killed Thelma and all her men if you'd been in cahoots with them."

"We ought to remember yuh with kindest thanks, I reckon, Littlejohn," another man said grimly. "Stoppin' this bunch like yuh done saved the bank from bein' broke, which would have ruined us all. But mostly, I reckon, we'll remember yuh as a woman-killer."

"Then I may as well have Thelma's scalp at my belt to remind me that I'm a woman-killer," the gaunt outlaw said stonily.

He stepped forward, picked up the two thick, shiny braids of hair. Men yelled in sudden rage when the gaunt outlaw tugged on the braids, lifting the masked face from the dust. Then those yells of anger changed to howls of consternation, for the brown Stetson came off. So did a black wig, that had the two thick braids attached.

"Nice trophy," Long Sam droned, jiggling the wig by the braids.

THE GAUNT OUTLAW stooped, seized the red mask that covered the girlish bandit's face, and gave it a savage yank. The crowd yelled wildly, for the face Long Sam had exposed was thin, seamed, spike-nosed, and vicious even in death. Along the pointed chin and across the hollow cheeks was a healthy growth of day-old whiskers.

"Buck Drummond!" a dozen voices yelled at once.

"Buck Drummond," Long Sam said soberly. "This wig, a few pads of cotton and a girl's clothes, made him look a heap like Thelma Howard, especially when he rode the palomino and fancy saddle him or some of the rest of Pike Luther's bunch stole from Thelma."

There was a sudden sheepishness about the men who sidled away from Long Sam. They began hastily ripping slickers and masks from the other three dead bandits, rage and surprise mingling in their shouts as they bared dead faces.

"Littlejohn was right, boys!" a deep voice boomed. "Here's Pike Luther!"

"This one is Harley Mitchell—or was Harley Mitchell!" another voice shouted.

"Grat Flagg's ugly mug was hid by the mask I just pulled off this one," a third man cried. "Littlejohn, how in thunder did you get onto them?"

"That's a long story," the gaunt outlaw declared. "You can get the details from Matt Howard and Thelma, later on. But just as a hint, I'd start wonderin' if that quarrel between Matt and his girl wasn't a put up job, if I was you Los Robles gents. If you get to thinkin' of it that way, you'll likely savvy that Thelma Howard has been playin' a mighty dangerous game to get the deadwood on Pike Luther and his murderin' outfit."

Long Sam turned around and limped away while Los Robles citizens swapped startled glances. Long Sam got his Stetson,

put it on, and gave a startled grunt when he saw two men rush to Sheriff Jerry King, who had started moving around.

Long Sam hurried across the boardwalk and into the dark runway between Pike Luther's Rainbow House and the hardware store. Despite throbbing wounds he kept hurrying until he was up the steps and back in the cool, dim hallway where he had locked Bella Neal in the closet.

Long Sam could hear Bella working at the locked door, but did not go toward her prison. There were still muffled thumping sounds coming from the room where he had seized Bella, and the gaunt outlaw went along the hallway to the door, then inside.

Thelma Howard's dark gray eyes looked as big as saucers. She lay on a floor that was richly carpeted, staring up at Long Sam, trying to say something through the gag that had been wedged into her mouth.

She was tied hand and foot, roped to the heavy post of a massive walnut bedstead. Two thick, black braids trailed across the rug as she lay there, cheeks paling as she stared at the blood and dirt smeared outlaw.

"I ought to pull one of my guns, and put a knot on that pretty head of yores to repay you for last night, Thelma," he said grimly. "You certainly messed things up by runnin' to Pike Luther, you little dunce!"

THELMA made frantic sounds through the gag in her mouth, and begged with her eyes to be released. Long Sam sighed, took out his knife, and cut the bonds away from her wrists and booted ankles. Thelma sat up, yanked the gag out of her mouth, and flung it aside.

"Sam, I'm sorry about last night, honest I am," she said hastily. "I'll try to

make you understand that, when I have the chance. But right now, I want to know what you did with that Bella Neal woman, and what all that shooting I heard was about. You're wounded, so—"

"So quit jabberin', and let's get out of here," Long Sam interrupted. "Or will you want to pull one of my guns and mebbe shoot me, this time, instead of just puttin' a knot on my head, when I tell you that yore dream boy, Pike Luther, is lying down yonder in the street dead from slugs fired out of my own guns?"

"I detested Pike Luther!" Thelma said sharply. "Oh, I was thrilled when he first started paying attention to me, because I had never known such a man before. Dad blew up, and said a lot of things that made me good and sore. I pretended to be in love with Pike just to make dad mad. Then dad cut me out of his will, and made such a beastly mess of the whole thing I couldn't back up without knuckling under completely."

"What you needed, and still need, is a wallop in' that'd leave blisters!" Long Sam said sourly. "You and Matt are so blamed much alike, you can't settle ordinary squabbles without lettin' yore tempers go. But you two hotheads are in the clear on this, if you'll only listen to reason."

"What do you mean, we're in the clear?" Thelma asked uneasily. "Joe Fry came to Mr. Brule's house last night and arrested me. Won't he arrest me again, Sam?"

"Not now," the gaunt outlaw said wearily. "Pike Luther and his bunch are all done for. They had just robbed the bank when I nailed 'em. Buck Drummond was dressed to look like you. Did you know that Buck has been passin' for you durin' all these robberies and murders that bunch have pulled?"

"I didn't know it until I got back to town, last night," Thelma Howard said

shakily. "I came straight here, to tell Pike that Harley Mitchell, Buck Drummond and Grat Flagg had wrecked the buckboard Joe Fry had me in. Pike tied me up, and put that Neal woman to guarding me. When we were alone, Bella Neal told me the whole thing. I was to be smuggled out of town this morning in a wagon, and Bella was to take me to an old mine, somewhere back in the hills."

"They couldn't afford to let Fry get you away from here, of course." Long Sam shrugged.

"They meant to kill me, Sam!" Thelma choked. "That Bella Neal hates me. She was Pike Luther's girl, and was crazy jealous over him. She told me she'd kill me after we got out into the hills, and that Pike Luther wouldn't lift a hand to protect me."

"He wouldn't have, either," Long Sam grunted. "But that bunch is done for now, so let's get out of here, Thelma."

"But what can I do?" the girl said gloomily. "Dad disowned me, and I won't go crawling back home. I'll get—"

"Blisters, if you meddle with my temper any longer," Long Sam growled. "Down in the street a while ago, I circulated the idea that you and your dad had only pretended to fight and fall out, while you nosed around for information that would pin the deadwood on Pike Luther and his bunch. By addin' a few trimmings to that start, you and Matt can wiggle out of this mess yore blamed tempers got you into without losin' too much face."

"Sam, you're wonderful!" Thelma cried.

"That Sleeper hoss of mine is out back of this buildin'," he snapped at her. "We'll sashay down there, and head for your daddy's Lazy H. I'll put you up behind Sleeper's saddle, the way I did last night. Or will you bounce a gun off my thick head and go larrupin' off to see another murderin' tinhorn of Pike Luther's caliber?"

"Honestly, Sam, I'm sorry about last night," the girl said demurely. "I was nervous and angry over the way Pike's men had wrecked that buckboard. Besides that, I was afraid you'd take me home to Dad. But I want to go home, now. I'm lonely for Dad I—What's that?"

LONG SAM was glad that Bella Neal, probably having heard voices, had suddenly begun kicking at the closet door and yelling to be let out. Thelma Howard's voice had thickened, and there were tears in her eyes as she admitted that she was lonely, and anxious to go home.

"That racket you hear, Thelma, is Bella Neal, tryin' to kick the door off that closet I locked her in at the end of the hall." The gaunt outlaw chuckled drily. "We'll just leave Bella where she is. Someone will find her, and if she can talk her way out of bein' mixed up with Pike Luther and his bandit bunch, that's her good luck. Come along, youngster. The way you've both suffered, I've got a hunch you and yore daddy will be a mite careful about letting yore tempers go hog wild, after this."