

LONG SAM DEALS IN DOLLARS

By
LEE BOND



Long Sam peered cautiously out on Main Street and saw Tudd Baker surrounded by excited men

Littlejohn Pits Sharp-Shooting Against Sharp-Dealing!

PISTOL shots had drawn Long Sam Littlejohn along the timbered ride for a quarter-mile. He was directly above the spot where the Loma Pintado stage road forded Breakneck Creek now, hauling the big, ugly roan horse he called Sleeper to a halt in a thick stand of giant oaks. The pistols were still banging away down in the canyon below the ridge, and Littlejohn sat his roan for a moment, his thin, unusually tall body stretching up stiffly as he tried to see what

was going on down there. He gave his yellow-thatched head a disappointed shake when he discovered that he could not see over the rim from his position.

“Sounds like a couple or three cowhands, takin’ target practise, the way they’re spacin’ their shots,” Littlejohn observed aloud. “But a bounty-plastered noose-dodger by the name of Long Sam Littlejohn better hadn’t get too nosy about that shootin’ until he knows for sure what it’s all about, eh, Sleeper?”

Long Sam had swung out of the saddle as he talked, his lean hands dropping instinctively to readjust the hang of two black butted six-shooters that were slung against his thighs. He moved cautiously out towards the rim of the ridge, his black-clad figure at a cautious crouch as he crept into a stand of bushes. The pistols had gone silent now, but the shooters were still there at the gravelly ford on Breakneck Creek.

“What the heck!” Long Sam muttered, smoke-colored eyes widening in surprise.

Two Stetson hats, one gray, one brown, were propped up on sticks, and a long-sleeved calfskin jacket was hung on another beside them. Three men were holstering guns they had just reloaded. Two were bareheaded. The third wore a fine white Stetson, which he pushed back with a quick motion of his hand as he halted before the hats and jacket that had unquestionably been used as targets.

“Todd Baker, by thunder!” Long Sam muttered, watching the big fellow who wore the white Stetson.

The two bareheaded men were now lifting the Stetsons from the sticks that held them, and Long Sam saw them laughing as they poked exploring fingers through bullet holes in brims and crowns. The man who had picked up the brown Stetson was short and stocky, while the fellow who had hold of the gray hat was slim, medium-sized, and quick in his movements.

LONG SAM recognized the stocky fellow as Rufe Wicker and the small, quick man as Erd Garvey. They were a tough pair, those two, known to be mixed up in smuggling, stock stealing and other larcenous activities all along the Border.

Long Sam switched his smoky eyes to big Todd Baker, a gambler and stock buyer who had drifted into Loma Pintado

four or five years before. This was the first time Long Sam had been in this country for almost two years, yet he had heard rumors to the effect that lumbering and mining had caused the town to boom considerably since his last visit. The gaunt outlaw remembered hearing, also, that Todd Baker had branched out, dealing in mines, lumber and cattle ranches.

“The big booger looks prosperous, all right,” Long Sam said aloud. “But what’s he messin’ around with a pair of ridge-runners like Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey for?”

Rufe Wicker had pulled the brown Stetson down over his fuzzy dark hair, and Erd Garvey had donned the gray hat. Garvey reached out now, took up the red-and-white calfskin jacket and slipped it on. He poked a finger in a bullet hole on the tip of the left shoulder, and said something that made Todd Baker and Rufe Wicker laugh.

Rufe Wicker pulled the three forked sticks out of the ground, rubbed his boot over the ground to fill the holes, then carried the sticks into a thicket beside the road. Erd Garvey followed Wicker, and when they reappeared a few moments later, they were leading six saddled horses. Long Sam grunted in surprise.

He could tell that Todd Baker had taken command now by the way he acted. He had swung up into a fancy, hand-tooled saddle that was cinched on a fine palomino stallion. He was talking and gesturing rapidly, while Rufe Wicker tied the reins of the three horses to the horns of the riderless saddles on their backs. Wicker mounted a chunky black horse and watched Erd Garvey unfasten a pair of saddlebags from a tall gray’s saddle and hand the pouches up to Todd Baker.

“Jumpin’ Jupiter!” Long Sam said excitedly.

Todd Baker had taken from each

saddlebag four thick bundles of currency, holding them up, one at a time, and laughing. He tucked the bundles inside his shirt and tossed the empty bags back to Erd Garvey.

Rufe Wicker started the three riderless horses up the canyon, riding hard at their heels and swinging the free end of a lariat at their rumps. Todd Baker and Erd Garvey watched until the timber along the canyon swallowed Wicker and the horses he was driving, then separated, Erd Garvey heading down the stage road towards Lorna Pintado at a run.

Todd Baker forded Breakneck Creek behind Garvey, walking his stallion along calmly. He rode out of the water on a rocky point, swinging away from the road. He crossed the timbered bottom and started up the slope, traveling straight towards Long Sam Littlejohn.

Long Sam crawfished out of the thicket, ran to Sleeper, and swung up to the hand-tooled black saddle. He walked the roan deeper into the timber, halting where the low-sweeping boughs of a giant oak screened him. He waited there, watching the rim of the ridge top until Todd Baker appeared: Baker went south, trotting his stallion easily along the ridge. Long Sam grinned wryly, eased Sleeper forward when Baker was out of sight, and picked up the stallion's sign.

"Followin' that yahoo is apt to be a chore, Sleeper, for he'll likely try foggin' his sign," the gaunt outlaw muttered.

But following Todd Baker was no chore at all. Baker kept away from trails and roads until he was in the very outskirts of Loma Pintado, then trotted his fine stud casually along a side street to the main drag. He turned west on the town's principal street, which was, Long Sam noticed uneasily, boiling with activity.

Long Sam also noted that people started running towards Todd Baker, and

decided that he had traveled far enough. He swung Sleeper into an alley, left the horse behind an unused shed that was almost hidden by tall weeds, then went on foot to the rear of the business buildings. Long Sam moved guardedly through a narrow, dark passage between two log walls, halting where shadow shrouded him as he peered cautiously out on Main Street.

Todd Baker sat his horse out there in the middle of a crowd, his jaw hanging open, shiny black eyes bugged out as if he were greatly surprised. The excited, shoving men around him were shouting, their voices a bedlam of anger and excitement.

"Is this some kind of a prank, boys?" Baker asked loudly. "Are yuh joshin', about Erd Garvey ridin' into town, claimin' him and Rufe Wicker had been held up and robbed of our beef money?"

"So it's all news to yuh, is it, Baker?" a stubby, grizzled man yelled.

"What do yuh mean by that kind of talk, Herb Denver?" Baker asked angrily.

"Why stall, Baker?" Denver ranted. "When yuh bunched up a thousand head of cattle a while back and got set to drive to market, yuh oily-tongued me and Nate Tolliver and Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler into poolin' another thousand head to go to market with yore stuff."

"You had four hundred head of your Boxed D stuff in the pool herd," Baker nodded. "There were three hundred head of Nate Tolliver's Rockin' T steers. Gus Pryor sent a hundred and fifty head of his Bar 88 critters, and Ed Sutler sent a hundred and fifty head of his Star B longhorns."

"Which tallies a thousand head," Herb Denver rasped. "Cattle were fetchin' an average of twenty dollars a head at the market, I hear. That's twenty thousand dollars, Baker, that me and Nate Tolliver

and Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler are out, for Erd Garvey claims him and Rufe Wicker got held up out at the Breakneck Creek ford and robbed of that money. Garvey had a bullet hole in the shoulder of his jacket and three-four bullet holes in his hat. He says Rufe Wicker got hit in the hat, too. And that's sorta funny, them two claimin' they was jumped by three bandits, who fogged them up plenty but couldn't hit nothin' meatier than their hats. Me, I think the whole thing is just twenty thousand dollars' worth of lies that was hatched in yore own skull, Baker!"

TODD BAKER did a good job of acting, Long Sam thought. Baker pulled himself up stiffly in the saddle, fists clenched as he glared down at the raging little ranchman who had bluntly accused him.

"Will some of you men be civil enough to tell me what happened?" he asked, appealing to the crowd in general.

"I reckon Herb told it all, Baker," a man replied. "Erd Garvey did come to town and say him and Rufe Wicker had been held up and robbed. Garvey said Wicker'd taken the trail of the three bandits. Sheriff Elmer Bland got a posse together and lit out of here, fast. Garvey rode with 'em."

Long Sam saw that the speaker was a big, fat man, with thick, gray hair hanging down in unkempt locks from beneath a shabby, sweat-marked Stetson. The speaker's voice had been blurred and husky-toned, and his broad face was blotched with red.

"Thanks, Tolliver," Todd Baker said slowly. "You had three hundred head of your Rockin' T steers in that pool herd that went up the trail with my cattle. But I see yuh're not accusin' me of bein' a thief, the way Herb Denver is."

"I feel the same way Herb does," Nate

Tolliver said huskily. "Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler feel that way, too."

Long Sam saw Todd Baker's face redden, and knew that he was not faking anger, then.

"A lot of you people around here have been whisperin' things behind my back for a long time!" he lashed out. "You've claimed I make business deals off the bottom of the deck, and that's hurt my rep a lot. I've been wantin' a chance to shut such lyin' mouths, and I think this is the time I can do it!"

"Anybody who ever dealt with yuh got skinned!" some hombre yelled. "But yuh're gettin' paid back now, Baker. All that cut-over valley land yuh bought and had laid out into farms is stayin' on yore hands, because people are afraid to deal with yuh."

"All them hundreds of acres of land cost yuh a pile of dinero, Baker," little Herb Denver yelled. "But you should worry. Yuh've just made twenty thousand dollars, clear profit, on this razzle-dazzle holdup scheme."

"I had a thousand head of cattle in that drive," Todd Baker said harshly. "If the bandits who held up Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey get away, then I'm out a cool twenty thousand. But we won't talk about that, Herb. I said I want a chance to stop you and others like you from slanderin' me, and I think I can do it."

He broke off, ran coolly calculating eyes over the unfriendly faces. He looked back at scrawny little Herb Denver, and Long Sam thought he saw the hint of a grin kink the corners of Baker's mouth.

"Herb, if Sheriff Bland hasn't captured those bandits and recovered our money by noon tomorrow, you and Nate Tolliver and the other two, Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler, be down at my office yonder," Baker said loudly. "You've got eight thousand dollars comin', Herb, Nate Tolliver, there, has six

thousand comin', Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler have three thousand apiece due them."

"What are yuh fixin' to do? Swap us that farm land yuh're stuck with for the cash yuh stole off us?" Herb Denver asked suspiciously.

"Before all of these witnesses, Denver, I'm tellin' yuh to fetch the other three men, who had cattle in that pool herd, down to my office at noon tomorrow, in case the sheriff fails to nab those bandits," Baker said. "I'll have cash money there to pay each of yuh his full claim."

The silence that fell was so complete Long Sam wondered if all those people out there were actually holding their breath.

"Well, dogged if Baker isn't a fast one, at that," Long Sam chuckled.

The gaunt outlaw was pretty sure he saw through Todd Baker's shenanigan. Having pulled off so many shady deals that local people were afraid to do business with him, Baker now found himself holding hundreds of acres of farm land which he could not turn to a profit.

"Now Baker pulls off this phony robbery, and makes the fancy play of offerin' to hand the men who trusted him with their cattle every cent they got comin'," Long Sam mused soberly. "That'll start a lot of people who have been considerin' Todd Baker a crook to wonderin' if they haven't been mistaken."

Long Sam savvied now why there had been three extra saddle horses out there at the Breakneck Creek ford. Sheriff Elmer Bland and his posse would track those three horses far back into the hills, where Rufe Wicker would be waiting to say he had trailed the three 'bandits' who had stolen the beef money. Sheriff Bland, and a lot of other honest people, would think the 'bandits' had had fresh horses waiting and had changed mounts, skittering yonderly into the roughs.

"Smooth," Long Sam spoke the one word, watching Todd Baker dismount at a hitch-bar under a big sign that bore his name and tie his stallion.

Baker started toward his office, but halted to face several men who had called to him and were hurrying through the street's deep dust. Men were moving everywhere now, and Long Sam realized that he had stuck around about as long as he dared. He counted doorways, saw that he was only three buildings east of Baker's office, then eased back into the dark runway between the buildings and returned to the cluttered alley.

CAUTION born of bitter years on the outlaw trails halted Long Sam short of the sunlight that lay in the alley. He heard stealthy steps and backpedaled until he melted into the darkest shadows where he stretched out prone on the ground. A man's slim figure was etched against the bright oblong he watched, and Long Sam's breath drew in and held as excitement went through him in sharp waves.

The slim man had stopped squarely before the dark passage where Long Sam lay hidden. The fellow wore shiny black boots, gray trousers, and a cut-away black coat. As he turned, Long Sam saw a snowy shirt bosom and a brocaded vest that hugged his flat middle and was spanned by a thick gold watch chain. He had on a celluloid collar with a black string tie, and a flat-crowned black Stetson was slanted down over his eyes. His thin, mahogany-bronze face had a red slit of a mouth, high cheek bones, and a thin beak of a nose.

The man glanced into the dark passage, briefly probing the shadows with eyes that were as black and shiny as wet shoe buttons. He was Johnny Fishkiller, a half-breed Choctaw from up in the Indian Nations, and one of the wild bunch

successfully bossed by a pretty little widow named Belle Reed.

Johnny Fishkiller's eyes probed through the dark passage to the light of the front street beyond, then he moved on, his step light and fast. Long Sam Littlejohn let out a slow breath and stood up. He ghosted to the corner of the log wall where he had lain and peered out cautiously. Johnny Fishkiller was going on up the alley, halting each time he came to an opening between buildings to peer towards the street. He went straight to the rear of the building Long Sam knew to be Todd Baker's office and reached out his left hand to try the back door latch. The door gave, and Johnny Fishkiller's right hand whisked a pearl-gripped six-shooter from beneath his coat tails as he stepped briskly through the door and out of Long Sam's sight.

"Well, now!" the gaunt outlaw said thoughtfully. He stepped out into the alley and strode briskly along until he came to a window.

A heavy drape had been pulled across the window, but the sash remained up, for Long Sam saw the curtain belly as a breeze touched it. He leaned against the log wall near the window, his head tilted as if he were reading a sun-yellowed newspaper that he had snatched up in the alley.

"So yuh're Johnny Fishkiller!" Todd Baker was saying gruffly. "I've heard of yuh. Yuh're half Choctaw Indian, half white. Some addlepatated doctor from Missouri picked yuh up when yuh were just a boy, and spent a pile of good money puttin' yuh through fancy schools. A lot of good it done him, now didn't it?"

"My background has nothing to do with this call, Mr. Baker," Johnny Fishkiller said. "Will you please answer the question I asked you?"

Long Sam listened more intently. He

had crossed trails with Johnny Fishkiller a few times. The half-breed's calm voice, his polished, gentlemanly manner, made it hard to believe that he was a nervy thief and a cold-blooded killer.

"Question?" Todd Baker was blustering. "What question did yuh ask me, anyhow?"

"Don't be childish, Mr. Baker," Johnny chided gently. "After all, this gun in my hand is not without significance. I asked you what sort of cute trick you're pulling here, and so far you've evaded answering."

"I don't even know what yuh're talking about!" Todd Baker snapped.

"It seems incredible that you would be so stupid, yet I do believe you have on your person that money your henchmen are supposed to have lost to bandits," Johnny Fishkiller said pleasantly.

"Git out of here, Injun!" Baker said hoarsely. "If yuh don't, I'll let out a holler that'll fetch half the town. Then where'll yuh be?"

"I'd be right here, to suggest that the good gentlemen of this fair city examine the bulges under your shirt," Johnny laughed easily. "Would you mind that, Mr. Baker?"

Long Sam Littlejohn grinned appreciatively. Todd Baker certainly would mind letting people see the objects that made his shirt bulge, and the quavery note in his voice said so.

"Ah, just as I thought!" Johnny said suddenly. "The bulges under your shirt are no doubt packets of paper money, my sly carpet-bagger. Forty thousand, cool cash, eh?"

Long Sam's face stiffened, losing the grin of enjoyment. His smoky eyes looked startled as he swung a glance at the billowing curtain that fluttered and snapped in the breeze. Inside the room beyond that curtain, he heard Todd Baker

cursing in a whining sound of mingled rage and alarm.

"I can well understand your being perturbed, Mr. Baker," Johnny said pleasantly. "After I've relieved you of the money inside your shirt, you'll actually have to dig into your own pocket to pay those cowmen. I relish this moment and regret that more of your carpetbagging kind can't be caught in the same sort of predicament. Hand over the money, please."

Long Sam's smoky eyes went hard with swift determination. He moved closer to the window, knowing that the popping, whipping curtain would mask any slight sounds he might make against the log wall.

"Get away from me, you hominy guzzler," Todd Baker was saying hoarsely. "If yuh'll listen to reason, maybe we can work out a deal that—"

There was a quick shuffle of feet, a snarl of fear and rage that ended, half-uttered, as steel struck hard against flesh and bone. Even as those sounds lived briefly, Long Sam Littlejohn was throwing a leg over the window sill, the guns in his hands shoving away the curtain until he was beyond it, watching the blur of Johnny Fishkiller's slim body whip around.

The gun in Fishkiller's hand spat red-tipped thunder, and Long Sam winced as the slug ripped across his left jaw, touching lightly but hotly. Then his own twin guns bucked, and Johnny Fishkiller went over backwards so fast his shiny boots flew high into the air.

Long Sam swore and plunged in to slap the crown of Todd Baker's head with the barrel of his left-hand Colt. He leaped over the sprawled man, slammed home a stout bolt on the inside of Baker's office door. When Long Sam whirled around, Johnny Fishkiller was lying just as he had

fallen.

FISTS were pounding on the bolted door to Todd Baker's private office now, and a dozen voices were shouting the carpetbagger's name. Long Sam bent over Baker, yanked the man's shirt out, and hastily grabbed the four fat bundles of bills.

"Baker!" a man yelled through the locked door. "What's the trouble in there?"

Long Sam hastily crammed the money inside his shirt. He walked to the window, pulled the curtain aside, and looked out. The alley was completely deserted, and Long Sam moved fast, feeling the bundles of money bounce inside his shirt. He was panting hard when he went around the long-deserted shed and through the tall weeds to where he had left his horse.

"Johnny Fishkiller didn't just happen to show up here and make a try at grabbin' the beef money off Todd Baker," Long Sam muttered, as he swung up to Sleeper's saddle.

He turned his ugly roan south, riding out past the fringes of the town, then swinging along a timbered slope. When he was at the far western edge of Loma Pintado, he reined in towards a shabby little log house that stood alone on a slight rise. The yard was barren, and the dusty panes of the windows seemed to stare at Long Sam like tired, dull eyes as he rode past the house and out to a corral of poles that circled a stout log barn.

Long Sam dismounted and led his roan through a tall gate and on to the barn. After he had stalled and fed the horse, he stood for a moment, listening to Sleeper's powerful teeth rip bites from ears of corn. He saw the neatly kept interior of the barn and shook his head, smiling a little ruefully.

"Elmer is like all bachelors," he said

musingly. "He keeps his place with an eye for the comforts of himself and his horses, with never a care for the look of things."

Leaving the barn and corral, he followed a well-worn path down to the forlorn little house that was Sheriff Elmer Bland's bachelor home. Long Sam let himself in the back door and stood there for a moment, glancing over the clean, coarsely masculine room that served both as kitchen and dining room. Beyond, through an open door, he could see the sheriff's living room, drab but neatly kept.

Long Sam sighed, gave his head a slow shake. Unless the law got him and hanged him for some of the crimes he was supposed to have committed, he thought grimly, he would probably wind up living in a place like this, some day, with loneliness, defeat, and frustration for companions. His hands touched the four fat bulges of money under his shirt.

"Forty thousand dollars!" he said slowly. "Down in South America, a gringo with that much cash money—"

Long Sam swore suddenly and with harshness. He pulled the hat off his head, hung it on a wall peg, and dumped water from a brass-bound cedar bucket into a tin washpan.

Long Sam ate heartily of cold food, piled his dishes in a pan, then returned to the table, sat down, and built a smoke. He pulled the four packets of money from inside his shirt, feeling excitement stir in him again as he looked down at the wealth. He began counting then, and the cigarette was hanging dead and forgotten in the corner of his mouth when he finished.

"Forty thousand, cool, hard cash!" he said huskily, and the hand he reached up to pluck away the dead cigarette was shaking.

He lifted a corner of the white cloth that covered butter dish, salt and pepper

shakers, and syrup pitcher and sugar bowl on the sheriff's table. He pushed the money beneath the cloth, then leaned back, staring at nothing, his mind occupied in swift, hard thought. He had arrived at what he considered a good guess as to how Johnny Fishkiller had known Todd Baker would be packing forty thousand dollars in cash, when the slam of approaching hoofs brought him up quickly.

Long Sam went into the living room, standing where he could see the trail that slanted down to Loma Pintado's main drag. There was a stir down along that street, men and women and youngsters milling everywhere. But Long Sam's eyes left the shifting crowd, came back to Sheriff Elmer Bland, who had ridden up the sloping trail and into the yard.

Bland swung down from a hard-run horse and started up the steps, a tall, thin man with almost white hair. He stopped very suddenly, head jerking up, the hand he had reached out towards the screen door halted. Gray eyes that were as hard as drill steel probed through the dusty screen, searching the gloomy interior of the house.

"The house is yores, Elmer, so come on in," Long Sam spoke quietly.

The sheriff grunted, reached out, and whipped the screen back. He came through into the room and stopped on skidding boots, his right hand down close to the butt of the gun holstered on his lean thigh. He stood there, mute for long seconds, a hint of pallor touching his face.

"Yuh picked a heck of a time to come callin', Sam," he said finally, and his voice was more weary than complaining.

Long Sam held out his hand, grinning. Bland gripped the hand automatically, pumped once in a friendly way, then gave a hard yank as color touched his neck and face.

"What are yuh tryin' to do, cripple me?" Long Sam chuckled, spreading and

wiggling bruised fingers.

“Get that fugitive from a glue factory yuh call a horse and split the breeze away from here, Sam,” Bland said crossly.

“What’s the trouble?” Long Sam asked innocently.

“Trouble?” the sheriff groaned. “Three galoots stuck up Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey out at Breakneck Creek ford a while ago, and got clean away with forty thousand dollars in cash. The money belonged to Todd Baker and four other fellers. The three bandits changed horses up in the rock country at the head of Breakneck, and their sign ain’t been picked up again. I rode back to town to gather more men and change horses, and blamed if one of Belle Reed’s roughnecks, from up in the Nations, hadn’t waltzed into town and robbed Baker at Baker’s office while I was gone. But—”

HE BROKE off, pulling in a long breath, his temper cooling, but leaving tension in him.

“But what, Elmer?” Long Sam asked quietly.

“Baker’s story don’t make sense,” the sheriff said slowly. “He claims Johnny Fishkiller, that roughneck from Belle Reed’s wild bunch, walked in, throwed a gun on him, demanded money, then hit him on the jaw with the Colt. Baker claims that he was knocked down but not plumb cold, and that he heard somebody else come into the office and swap shots with Johnny Fishkiller. Then, so Baker says, this other party slapped him across the head with a gun, robbed his desk of sixty thousand dollars, and got clean away.”

“Baker’s a liar,” Long Sam said bluntly.

“I’d think that, too, for keepin’ sixty thousand dollars in cash around his office don’t sound like Todd Baker,” the sheriff groaned. “But he’s so crazy mad, Sam,

that it can’t be play actin’ on his part. He’s offered two thousand dollars for the return of the money he says was stolen, too. On top of that, Baker’s left jaw is swelled up, and there’s a big knot on top of his head, provin’ that he sure was hit twice. And Johnny Fishkiller was layin’ there in the office, stone dead.”

“Two thousand smackeroots!” Long Sam droned. “And it’ll be honest money—almost.”

“Don’t get mixed up in this mess, boy,” the sheriff warned gravely.

“How long have Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey been hooked up with Baker?” Long Sam asked.

“Almost a year—ten months, at least,” the sheriff said, frowning. “But if that pair of prize hellions have pulled anything shady since they’ve been here I sure haven’t been able to catch ‘em at it.”

“What are they supposed to be doin’ for Todd Baker?” the gaunt outlaw wanted to know.

“Their job is to handle the livestock Baker buys and sells,” the sheriff explained. “They’ve made several trips to market with herds of Baker’s cattle. They were on the way back from market today with money from the sale of two thousand longhorns, when they got held up.”

“Yuh like to put a legal halter on Todd Baker, wouldn’t yuh, Elmer?” Long Sam asked thoughtfully.

“I’d give ten years of whatever life I’ve got left to be able to scotch that snake!” the sheriff said. “And that’s not all personal peeve, Sam. Baker is ruinin’ this town’s chance to grow and prosper. He’s spread out so much that any man who wants to come here and invest money in any kind of business soon finds out he has to deal with Todd Baker to get a start. And Baker’s cussed greed discourages such investors, sends them away to invest their money elsewhere.”

"I put somethin' on yore kitchen table out yonder that I want to show yuh, Elmer," Long Sam said quietly. "After yuh've seen what is out there, and heard a few things I've got to tell, I reckon we can figure a way between now and good dark, to fix Todd Baker's clock." . . .

Todd Baker's usually handsome face was haggard and tight with nervousness as he paced up and down his private office. He kept glancing at a fancy clock on his desk, cursing over the way time was slipping by. Baker's eyes were sunken and bloodshot, and there were deep lines at the corners of his mouth. At a quarter past eleven, Todd Baker suddenly dropped heavily into the chair behind his shiny desk. He ran shaking fingers through his already rumpled black hair, then tugged the limp collar loose at his throat.

"Wicker and Garvey have quit me—run out on me," he muttered hoarsely. "That, or Herb Denver and Nate Tolliver picked them up on the quiet, aiming to question them. If it's that—"

Baker broke off with a groan as he glanced at the clock again. He pulled out a desk drawer, produced bottle and glass. He poured and downed a stiff one, filled the glass again. He was reaching out to cork the bottle when the back door was opened and slapped shut.

Todd Baker got on his feet so fast the swivel chair crashed over behind him. The bottle he had tried to cork fell over, the amber fluid gurgling from it and making a chuckling sound in the silence. He groped for the gurgling bottle, stood it up in the pool of spilled liquor, his eyes never leaving the man who had stepped inside the back door and was standing there, watchin' him.

"Littlejohn!" Baker said hoarsely. "Long Sam Littlejohn."

"Howdy," Long Sam said and stepped forward, his stride unhurried.

Color came back into Baker's face, his eyes bulged, and became hot with anger.

"What do you want here, Littlejohn?" Baker asked harshly.

Long Sam stopped a pace from Baker's desk, smoky eyes meeting the promoter's boring gaze levelly.

"Twenty thousand dollars," he said simply.

"Are you batty?" Baker glowered. "I keep no such amount of money as that around my office. What is this, a holdup?"

"Speakin' of a holdup, Baker, reminds me that I've heard a tale about you bein' robbed of sixty thousand dollars, right here in this office, this afternoon," Long Sam drawled.

"I certainly was robbed of sixty thousand dollars!" Baker burst out. "Now you come along and want—"

"You certainly were not robbed of sixty thousand," Long Sam cut in. "There was forty thousand even in those four bundles of currency. So I dropped around for the twenty-thousand balance due me."

"You?" Todd Baker croaked. "You're the party who came in here and shot—"

He broke off, caution and anger silencing him. He glanced at the clock, ran his eyes around the room in a desperate way, then looked back at the gaunt outlaw.

"You robbed me!" he said hoarsely.

"I heard and saw yuh make that grandstand play out in the street when yuh offered Herb Denver and those other cowmen their money, makin' it look like yuh'd have to pay it out of your own pocket," Long Sam said coldly. "So I figured to teach one carpetbaggin' leech a lesson, and headed around back here, aimin' to relieve yuh of that money. But Johnny Fishkiller cut in ahead of me, and put this blister across my cheek with a slug when I stepped in here. I shot Johnny, batted you on top of the head with one of my guns, and got the four bundles of beef

money out of yore shirt.”

ANGER was mounting in Todd Baker again putting bright spots on his cheeks and bringing a fierce brightness to his eyes.

“I think I savvy why yuh told that windy about bein’ robbed of sixty thousand here in yore office,” Long Sam said quickly.

“Do you?” Baker asked, looking at him in a slow, measuring way.

“You aim to welch on the promise yuh made to pay Herb Denver and those other cowmen for the steers they trusted yuh to market for them,” Long Sam said. “By claimin’ yuh lost sixty thousand to an unknown robber, yuh’d have a good excuse to say yuh’re fresh out of cash, and stall Denver and those others off.”

“I certainly don’t intend to hand those fools any twenty thousand dollars!” Baker snapped.

“Well, I guess yuh didn’t aim to actually rob those four ranchmen of their beef money, at that,” Long Sam shrugged. “All yuh meant to do was whitewash yoreself by makin’ out like yuh paid them out of yore own pocket, eh?”

“All right, I intended to whitewash myself,” Baker retorted angrily.

“Haven’t yuh been wonderin’ how Johnny Fishkiller got into a position to know yuh’d be here in this office with that money on yuh?” Long Sam asked slowly.

“Of course I’ve been wondering about that,” Baker gritted. “Belle Reed got wind, somehow, that I meant to stage a phony robbery, evidently, and sent that smooth-talking pet of hers to lift the money. But how that girl got wise is something I can’t figure out.”

“I doubt if Belle Reed knew anything about yore plans,” Long Sam grunted. “I know nothin’ for sure, but at a guess,

Baker, I’d say Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey double-crossed yuh.”

“What’s that?” Baker cried, more excited than angry.

“It’s only a guess,” Long Sam replied. “But Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey haven’t shown up, have they?”

“Why do yuh suspect Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey of havin’ double-crossed me, Littlejohn?” Baker asked sharply.

“A trick like that would be just about their speed,” Long Sam said bluntly.

“Maybe yuh’re right, maybe not,” Baker said harshly. “What I’d like to know is why yuh’ve come back here, Littlejohn, instead of takin’ that forty thousand yuh got off me and ridin’ down the wind.”

“Maybe I want to make a deal with yuh,” Long Sam droned.

“Deal?” Baker’s interest quickened. “What kind of a deal?”

“Yuh offered two thousand dollars, cash, for the return of that beef money I took off yuh today,” Long Sam said slowly. “If I handed that money back to yuh, Baker, would yuh pay me that reward? And would yuh give Herb Denver, Nate Tolliver, Gus Pryor and Ed Sutler their money, too?”

“Are you zany?” Baker asked, blank amazement in his eyes.

“Maybe,” Long Sam drawled. “Anyhow, I wouldn’t expect a galoot like you to understand why I’m willin’ to swap forty thousand dollars in stolen money for two thousand dollars fairly honest money. But I’ll do it, providin’ I know Herb Denver and the other three cowmen will get their money.”

Todd Baker turned white again, and his eyes were burning like coals with an excitement that made him shake. He poured and downed a stiff drink, then dragged the back of one hand across his trembling mouth.

"Hand me that money, Littlejohn!" he said hoarsely. "I'll give yuh the two-thousand-dollar reward, on the spot. And yuh've got my word that Herb Denver and those other three greasy-sackers will get every penny due them."

"You'd give me the two thousand reward, because I'd bend a gun over yore head if yuh tried not to," Long Sam said coldly. "But yore word that Denver and those other three ranchmen will get their money isn't enough. Yuh'll have to put it in writin', Big Mister!"

"Listen, Littlejohn, yuh don't have to worry about me welchin'," Baker burst out. "Not another soul around here knows it, but a dozen or so farmers are due to show up here any day now, to look at some of the farm land I have for sale. Those farmers are from the Deep South, where hundreds like them are dissatisfied under Yankee rule. If I sell those men farms, they'll write their friends, and within six months to a year, I'll have buyers for every acre of farm land I own. But if this first group of men come here, and hear me called unkind names, they'll refuse to deal with me."

"So that's it," Long Sam mused. "You'd hand back the money that belongs to Herb Denver and his friends, knowin' everyone would be a little cautious about callin' yuh the crook yuh are, after that. But I hate to think what kind of deals yuh'd work on those people who are headed here to seek new homes."

"The devil take those Johnny Rebs!" Baker snapped. "They'll have money in their pockets, and it may as well be me that gets it. Quit worryin' about—"

Baker's voice broke off suddenly. Booted feet were pounding out in the front office and drawing rapidly towards the door that opened into Baker's private office. Long Sam leaped down the room,

flattening against the wall beside the office door.

TODD BAKER swore hoarsely, shoved his hand towards the six-shooter holstered on his thigh. He jerked his hand away hastily when he saw Long Sam's twin guns come leaping out, their muzzles slanted his way.

"Act natural," Long Sam ordered, and the whisper had barely left his lips when the door burst open and slammed shut behind two men.

Long Sam grinned coldly, laid his thumbs over the hammers of his guns, and looked at the backs of Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey. They bounded towards Baker's desk, panting as if they had run a considerable distance.

"Todd, what's this we hear about one of Belle Reed's bunch holdin' yuh up here in yore office?" stocky Rufe Wicker sang out.

"Judas Priest!" Erd Garvey cried. "Look at the blood on the carpet, there, Rufe. What we heard is the truth, I reckon."

"Where have you two been?" Baker snapped the words out, his lips trembling with anger and suspicion.

"We fiddled around out in the hills, so's everyone would think we were tryin' to cut the sign of the bandits that are supposed to have robbed us," Erd Garvey said slowly.

"Sheriff Bland came in two hours before sunset," Baker snapped. "The posse got in just after dusk."

"Sure, we know," Rufe Wicker said soothingly. "But Erd and me figgered to make it look like we was sure tryin' to find them bandits, so we stayed in the hills."

"But when Johnny didn't show up you headed for town, eh?" Long Sam's dry voice brought Rufe Wicker and Erd

Garvey around as if they were controlled by the same set of muscles.

Their hands had dived to gun butts, and their startled eyes goggled at Long Sam, who stood leaning against the wall, a cocked pistol in each slim hand. Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey took their hands off pistol grips.

"You boys had two-thirds of forty thousand dollars' worth of bad luck today," Long Sam drawled. "I caught Johnny Fishkiller holdin' Baker up, and had to shoot him."

"Johnny Fishkiller?" Erd Garvey said. "I've heard of him, Sam. One of Belle Reed's boys, ain't he?"

Erd Garvey had sleepy brown eyes set in a thin, tight-lipped face. He was cool and nervy, and rated one of the most deadly gunmen along the frontier.

"The game's up, boys," Long Sam said stonily. "I pumped two slugs through Johnny after he burnt this blister across my face with a bullet. But two slugs through a man's middle won't always kill him sudden. And I reckon you know a Fancy Dan like Johnny would want to unburden before he cashed in his chips."

"So Johnny did some talkin', did he?" Rufe Wicker asked no one in particular.

Wicker's stocky body settled down and forward a little, as if he were suddenly tired. His round, seamed face paled, but his chill blue eyes were steady and dangerously alert as he glanced at Todd Baker, then back at Long Sam.

"So you two decided to double-cross me, did yuh?" Baker flung the words furiously at his two hirelings.

"That's right," Erd Garvey said lazily. "And just what do yuh think you'll do about it, carpetbagger?"

Long Sam chuckled dryly. Todd Baker was batting his eyes rapidly, taken aback by Garvey's attitude. Baker stepped out from behind his desk and stood on wide-

planted feet, face reddening in anger after Long Sam's laughter.

"I'll settle with you two later!" he snapped at Wicker and Garvey. "I'm busy right now, so get out of here, both of yuh."

"Shut up, windbag!" Rufe Wicker said, and did not even glance at Todd Baker.

"Littlejohn, I reckon the things I've been hearin' about Joe Fry, the Deputy U. S. Marshal from Austin being the only lawman who really tries to nail yore hide on the fence are true," Erd Garvey said thinly. "But yuh've stubbed yore toe this time, Big Shorty! Yuh signed yore own death warrant when yuh beefed Johnny Fishkiller."

"You and Wicker aim to take up where Johnny left off?" Long Sam drawled.

"Erd and me fight no man's battles except our own," Rufe Wicker said gravely. "But there's the wild, woolly bunch Belle Reed bosses, Sam. Johnny was Belle's favorite beau. She'll put a price on yore hide for killin' Johnny, and some of the fastest guns in the southwest will be waitin' to smoke yuh down."

"Put up yore guns, Sam," Erd Garvey grinned drily. "You shortchanged me and Rufe out of considerable cash when yuh downed Johnny, that's certain. But nobody ever called yuh a liar and made it stick, so if yuh claim Johnny started fireworks, then Rufe and me can't blame yuh. What'd yuh do, pocket the whole forty thousand for yore own self, yuh long-shanked sinner?"

STUDYING Erd Garvey and Rufe Wicker attentively, Long Sam saw more envy than anything else in their glances. He lowered the hammers of his guns, pushed the weapons into holsters.

"I pocketed the forty thousand," he said quietly. "But I was just makin' a dicker with Baker to return the money to him when you boys showed up."

"You'd return that money?" Erd

Garvey's voice was as sharp as a whip popping in the room.

"Get out of here, you two!" Todd Baker burst out. "Littlejohn offered to return that money for the two-thousand-dollar reward I offered, and I took him up on it."

"Sam, are yuh crazy?" Rufe Wicker asked hoarsely.

"The two thousand I aim to collect will come out of Baker's end of that beef money, and I don't mind nickin' him," Long Sam chuckled. "Herb Denver and the other ranchers who trust you galoots to market their stock will get their cattle money. And I could whoop off two thousand dollars before the feelin' of wealth got to makin' me too big for my britches. So I made the dicker with Baker."

"You've got the money on yuh, Sam?" Erd Garvey asked, and his suddenly gleaming eyes made his grin look a little silly.

"He came here to make a deal with me, so where else would the money be except on him?" Todd Baker snapped. "Now clear out, you two double-crossers, and let me finish with Littlejohn!"

Rufe Wicker and Erd Garvey swapped the briefest of glances, then turned their backs squarely to Long Sam. Erd Garvey reached out, started to pick up the quart bottle on Baker's desk.

"What's the matter, is that bottle cracked or somethin'?" he asked.

"Sure seems to be leakin', for there's a puddle all around it," Rufe Wicker said. "Pick it up careful. I'll get the glass, and we'll try to get us a nip before we sift yonderly."

They were both leaning forward, their full attention on the bottle and the shot glass on Todd Baker's desk. Their hands moved, and only then did Long Sam realize that taking a drink was about the

last thing on their minds. It was the way they suddenly hunched over and down that warned him.

But that split second warning was enough for Long Sam Littlejohn. He wasted no time shifting position, but sent his own hands down, pulling the guns from his holsters in a single flipping motion. Flame and smoke gusted at him from the guns of Erd Garvey and Rufe Wicker, and as thunderous sound filled the room he felt a blow that was like the impact of a pony's kick against his right thigh.

The blow flung Long Sam over sidewise. His guns were bucking against his palms, and even as he slid down along the wall he saw Rufe Wicker double over, grabbing at his middle, then pitch down to the floor. A bullet dug splinters off the wall beside Long Sam's face, and another knocked the hat off his head as he hit the floor.

The matched guns in Long Sam's hands roared in unison, and he saw Erd Garvey's thin body whip over backwards across Baker's desk. Garvey's booted feet threshed, and his flailing arms knocked the quart bottle spinning. Then Garvey came tumbling off the edge of the desk, blood spilling from his gaping mouth, the life gone out of him by the time he struck the floor.

"Hold it, Baker!" a voice boomed. "Throw that gun down, or you're a dead duck!"

Long Sam gulped breath into his lungs, flexed his painfully hurt right leg. Finding he had no broken bones, he started to get up. He braced himself against the partition wall, the pain in his bullet-torn thigh making him a little dizzy as he stood there watching Sheriff Elmer Bland and a half dozen other men rush through the back door and spread out around the room.

"Sam, it started so blamed fast I

couldn't get in to help yuh!" the sheriff burst out. "You hit bad, boy?"

"I took a slug high up in my right leg, and it hurts like thunder," Long Sam gritted. "Bullet missed the bone, or I couldn't stand. Where did these gents with you come from?"

"The fat little fella, yonder, is Bill McCray, mayor of the town," the sheriff said quietly. "You know Felix Alvarado, the saddle maker, and Guy Foster, yonder, the livery owner. The other three men are merchants, Sam. I picked that bunch up and followed yuh down here. We were all hunkered outside that winder, and heard every dad-blamed word that was spoken in here."

"Why the crowd?" Long Sam asked sharply. "I thought yuh'd be out there alone, listenin' to what Todd Baker said to me."

"It's a pretty well known fact around here, Sam, that you and me are friends," the sheriff said quietly. "So Baker, there, could have shouted down anything I said, claimin' you and me had framed him or somethin' like that. But it can't be said that the mayor and these others are yore personal friends, so—"

"The devil we aren't that man's friends, Elmer Bland," the fat little mayor yelled. "Anyhow, we sure will be, from now on. Outlaw or not, Long Sam Littlejohn has loosened the tentacles of an octopus that has been sucking the financial life-blood from our community. Every man, woman and child in Loma Pintado owes him s friendship and respect."

"You framed me, Littlejohn!" Todd Baker burst out. "You had this pack of addlepates outside my window, listening to what was said. You tricky hellion, I'll remember this."

THE men with Sheriff Bland looked at him with disgust.

"You will remember this night, Baker," Felix Alvarado said slowly. "I hope the law can put you in jail for a very long time. But if you do escape legal punishments, certainly you are through here."

"What about Littlejohn?" Baker yelled angrily. "You fools heard him confess that he robbed me, didn't yuh?"

"Long Sam turned that money over to me, Baker," the sheriff snapped. "It's in the safe, over at my office. Now shut up, and don't get any notions about wanderin' off any place. The mayor and these others will take yuh over to my jail and lock yuh up."

"Lock me up?" Baker glared. "You fool, I'll sue yuh if yuh do that to me!"

"I'm holdin' yuh for questionin' until I can see what the county attorney thinks about charges," the sheriff said flatly. "Also, I'm holdin' yuh in protective custody, as they say. If you was to go prancin' around these streets after that crowd I heard gatherin' out front finds out the straight of things, yuh'd get tarred and dipped in feathers, if not lynched."

Long Sam had holstered his guns, picked up his hat, and was limping towards the back door. The sheriff overtook him, grabbed his arm, and helped him down the steps and out into the cooling night air.

"Sam, I'm worried," the sheriff said, and sounded it.

"What's the trouble now?" the gaunt outlaw asked wearily.

"That Belle Reed gal was sweet on Johnny Fishkiller, like Garvey and Wicker claimed," the sheriff groaned. "And you know what kind of a disposition that woman has. She'll set her whole pack on yuh, boy, sure as the world is round."

"I've been thinkin' about that," Long Sam admitted. "Belle Reed won't like it when she hears that I beefed her smooth

talkin' boy friend, I know. On the other hand, Elmer, there's a gent up there in the Nations who is mighty crazy about Belle. His name's Sam Starr, and he's had to play second fiddle to slick-tongued Johnny Fishkiller for quite a while."

"Yuh know Sam Starr?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"I know him," Long Sam said. "And Starr is one party who won't be after my

hide for drillin' Fishkiller, you can bet on that. Starr swings a lot of influence up there in the Nations, and I've got a hunch he'll sort of see that Belle's faunchin' over Johnny's death don't stampede her outlaws into givin' me too much trouble. Sam Starr is in love with Belle Reed, and now that Fishkiller is out of the runnin' I'd be willin' to bet that Belle Reed will become Belle Starr."