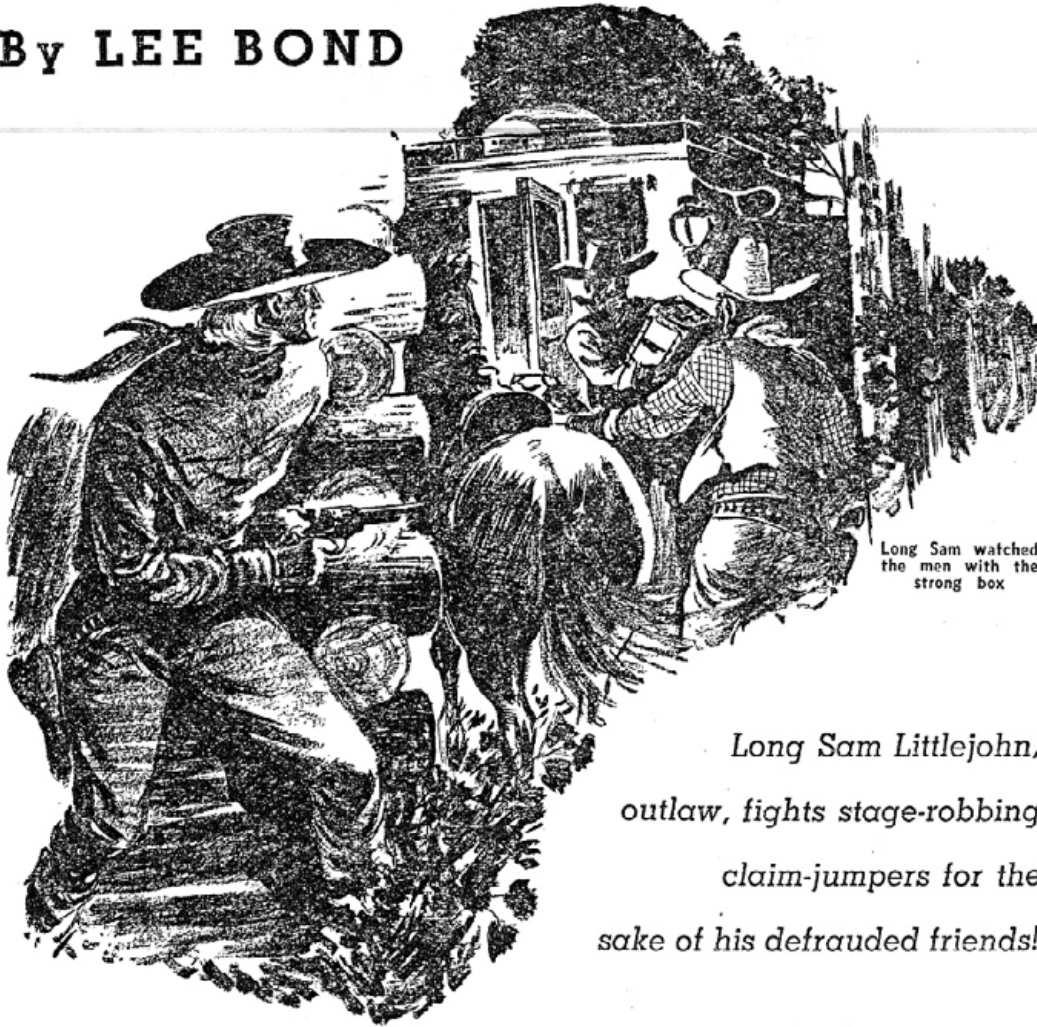


The Powdersmoke Prescription

By LEE BOND



Long Sam watched
the men with the
strong box

*Long Sam Littlejohn,
outlaw, fights stage-robbing
claim-jumpers for the
sake of his defrauded friends!*

THE sound of the rig coming down the road brought a growl of annoyance from "Long Sam" Littlejohn's throat. He halted his big, hammer-headed roan, Sleeper, his annoyance changing to surprise as he listened in the black Texas night that would soon end.

"If that ain't a stage, I never heard one," he thought. "But what in blue blazes is a stage larrupin' down here at this hour

of the night for?"

Long Sam swung out of saddle, a gaunt, tall man in black, from boots to flat-crowned Stetson. Ahead of him, perhaps two hundred yards, was the log way-station which Cole Barton ran for the stage company that operated a line from Turtle Shoal, on the Rio Grande, north to Sundog. There were lights in the station, but Barton was an early riser, and Long Sam often dropped in to have breakfast

with the lanky, graying Cole.

"But I'll get no breakfast this mornin'," Littlejohn grumbled. "That blamed stage is pullin' in, and it'll be daylight before they can change teams and head on south."

Outlawed, with a sizable reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn had to be eternally careful. Caution warned him to get back in the saddle, drift Sleeper off into the thick pine and oak timber, and make camp.

But curiosity was more potent than caution. Long Sam heard voices as the stage swung in before the station, and started easing forward through the timber, bony hands absently touching the butts of twin six-shooters that rode his thighs in tied-down holsters. He had come within a dozen paces of the back wall of the station when he heard a horse move in the black shadows.

Long Sam flattened out on the ground, smoke-colored eyes boring the shadows. When that horse moved he had heard the squeal of saddle leather, and caught the low tones of a man's voice, swearing uneasily. Now he could distinguish the dark bulk of the horse, and some man who wore a light Stetson was at the corner of the building.

Long Sam slid a six-shooter from holster and was starting silently towards the man when he heard boots slogging as someone hurried along the north wall.

"Here, Ben!" the man in the white Stetson called.

LONG SAM halted. There were two men there now, and the outlaw's eyes were straining to follow their swift movements.

"Give me that other box, Curly Polk, and get out of here!" a deep voice said.

"Yuh sound scared, Ben," "Curly" Polk chuckled. "Better simmer down, or

old Ike Nolan will notice. Here's the box yuh're to kick off the boot when the boys hold you up, down the line."

"Cut out yore fool gab, and give me that strongbox, Polk!" Ben's deep voice growled. "Here's the one with the pay roll in it, and yuh shore better hit the high spots!"

"Man, yuh're shakin' like a feller with malaria chills!" Curly snickered.

"Shut that big mouth, and get out of here with that *dinero*," Ben cut in hoarsely. "There's a passenger on the stage, and that feller has got me so nervous I'm plumb spooky."

"A passenger?" Curly snapped. "Tafflin chartered this stage for the special run. What got into you and old Ike to let a passenger on a chartered stage?"

"Me and Ike both tried to keep this feller off the stage," Ben declared. "We told him it was chartered to Bart Tafflin. But that didn't saw ary bit of ice with this feller. He cocked the derby hat he wears down over one snake-mean eye, chawed a little harder on the cigar he keeps stuck in his mouth, and said he was fixin' to ride that stage whether me and Ike like it or not."

"Ben Chate, you and Ike let that drummer bluff yuh!" Curly snapped.

"Ike Nolan give in," Ben grunted. "He's the driver. That derby-hatted, cigar-chewin' feller wears a checkered store suit, a b'iled shirt, and button shoes. He calls hisself Shorty Smith. But the way them ice-cold gray eyes of his drills into a man—"

"All right, take this duplicate strong box and hightail before Ike and Cole Barton miss yuh!" Curly Polk cut in. "Me, I ain't worryin' none about yore Shorty Smith."

Shock was hammering along Long Sam Littlejohn's nerves in jolting waves. Maybe Curly wasn't worrying about that

“Shorty Smith” jasper, but Long Sam was. The fellow Ben Chate had described could be but one man—Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin! And of all the badgemen in Texas, Joe Fry was Long Sam Littlejohn’s bitterest enemy.

“Ho, you knot-head!” Curly Polk’s voice made Long Sam jump.

Polk was beside his fiddle-footed horse, tying the strong box behind the cantle. Long Sam tightened his sweaty hand over the grips of his six-shooter. He catfooted forward and brought his six-shooter down on the white Stetson.

Curly Polk folded up like a wet sack. The horse shied and snorted, but Long Sam moved in fast, talking in low, soothing tones. He found a square metal box behind the bronc’s saddle, hastily loosened it, shouldered the strong box and started away. He had taken just two steps when a round, hard something punched his midriff.

“One wrong move, and this rifle goes off!” a voice said.

The voice was low-pitched, tense, and unmistakably the voice of a woman. And, behind him only a couple of paces, Long Sam could hear Curly Polk beginning to mutter as consciousness returned.

“Ma’am, listen!” Long Sam gulped. “If that gent on the ground wakes up and gets a gun in his fist—”

“You listen, whoever you are!” she cut in, voice low. “Go towards the timber, and go fast!”

Long Sam heaved a sigh of relief and marched off toward the timber where he had left Sleeper, the rifle barrel prodding his back.

“Wait!” she ordered suddenly. “I heard someone ahead of us.”

“That’s my hoss yuh hear, ma’am,” Long Sam said guardedly.

“Do as you’re told, unless you want trouble!” the woman said sharply. “Turn

right, and unless you do—”

“Nadine Grady!” Long Sam said suddenly.

“You must have known me a long time, or you’d call me Nadine Tafflin, instead of Nadine Grady!” the girl said shakily. “Who are you?”

“Well, since your mother married that Bart Tafflin carpetbagger, five years ago, I sorta quit droppin’ around to visit at the Stirrup Ranch, at that,” the gaunt outlaw said gravely. “But I reckon yuh’d know Long Sam Littlejohn if yuh saw him, wouldn’t you, Nadine?”

“Long Sam!” the girl gasped. “Oh, how could you do a thing like this, Sam?”

THERE was hurt in her voice, and Long Sam felt the gun removed from his spine. Then the girl was beside him.

“We’ve no time to talk now, Nadine,” the outlaw said quietly. “Yuh got a hoss around here somewhere?”

“My horse is across the road,” she said wearily. “I can’t go after it until the stage has left, of course. Sam, Joyce and Dan Grady, my mother and father, were always your friends. When Captain Dan co Grady died on the battlefield, but you returned, you told Mother and me we could always count on you as a friend. You were angry, I know, when Mother turned Cole Barton down and married Bart Tafflin. You disliked and mistrusted him. But stealing from Mother—”

Long Sam started to say something, but jerked his head around at the sound of a rider spurring fast, a roaring black hulk in the night.

“Let’s get out of here!” he gulped. “That fool, Curly Polk, runnin’ his hoss away like that’ll draw attention.”

“Curly Polk?” Nadine asked. “Sam, what makes you think that was Curly that just went past us? Why, he’s one of the Stirrup riders!”

Long Sam hurried her into the timber, where Sleeper was waiting. He looped one of the handles of the strong box over the saddle-horn, told the girl to mount. He bounded up behind her, shot long arms around her to grip the reins when Sleeper bogged his ill-shaped head and tried to buck.

"He'll behave, now, Nadine," the outlaw said. "But give me that rifle, and keep a good grip on the reins. This ugly old sinner don't like strangers."

She relinquished the rifle, and Sleeper moved off through the timber, swishing his ratty tail and grunting. The roan was crow-hopping along jerkily, but Long Sam kept digging with dulled rowels, for the dawn was making a pallid swath across the eastern sky, and the outlaw wanted to be well away from the stage station when daylight broke.

"This will do, Nadine," he said finally.

They had ridden down into a deep canyon, where giant oaks spread their branches in a solid canopy. She reined in, slid out of saddle, and jumped hastily away when Sleeper snapped at her with huge, yellow teeth.

Long Sam slid off the roan, and dodged barely in time to avoid an iron-shod hoof that came lashing at him. Sleeper rolled a piggish eye, snorted in disgust over two clean misses, and started drinking from a spring-fed creek.

Long Sam glanced at Nadine Grady uneasily. She was slim and small, with hair the color of strained honey, and big brown eyes. She wore a green silk shirt, sand-colored riding breeches, and bench-made boots of fine leather. Her soft lips were quivering, and there was so much of hurt-child look in her direct eyes that Long Sam squirmed.

"Look, little lady," he said quietly, "I've been cuffed around and accused of so many crimes I never committed that

I'm generally pretty tough-hided. But for you to think I'd steal from you and yore mother sort of gets me, Nadine."

"I was there, Sam, listening," she interrupted. "At the back of the stage station. I was hiding, across the road when the stage driver and some drummer left the stage and went inside with Cole. Ben Chate, the shotgun guard, waited until they were in the station and having coffee, then jumped down, dragged that strong box there off the boot, and ran around the station."

"Yuh followed Ben, Nadine?" Long Sam prompted.

She bit her lip, looked down at the toes of her boots.

"Yes, Sam," she said quietly. "Only I went around on the south side of the building. I was standing there, listening to a mutter of voices. I know that there was a horse there. There you turned around and came straight towards me, and I was so scared I still don't know for sure just what I did or said."

"You think Ben Chate and me are in cahoots, eh?" Long Sam asked.

"You hate Bart Tafflin, and with good reason, Sam!" she said slowly. "Perhaps that's all you thought about when you framed this with Ben."

"That makes me feel better, Nadine, hearin' yuh try to alibi me, anyhow," Long Sam chuckled.

SWIFTLY, he told her exactly what had happened, and was genuinely sorry for her when he saw her tears, and the humiliation in her eyes that begged his forgiveness.

"What I want to know, Nadine," he finished, "is how you happened to be out there, skulkin' around that stage station at any such hour."

"Sam, I do feel terrible for accusing you of stealing that money," Nadine said

shakily. "But I'm so upset over everything."

She looked up at him with a timid smile. Long Sam pulled his hat off, finger-combed a mop of thin, yellow hair, and waited while she regained her composure.

"What's this 'everything' that's keeping you upset, Nadine?" he asked finally.

"Bart Tafflin and his sneaking tricks, of course!" she said firmly. "About a year ago, Sam, he talked Mother into letting him start cutting timber up on the north part of our Stirrup range. He made it plain, right from the first, that I was not to go up there, claiming the loggers were such a rough, tough lot that I would be in danger."

"And that was all yuh needed to send yuh snoopin'," Long Sam grinned.

"Of course I snooped!" Nadine said. "And what those timber crews have done to those beautiful forests my father loved so almost broke my heart, Sam. Then I got a look at the books Bart Tafflin keeps at the ranchhouse—the books he shows to Mother, I mean. I knew, Sam, the moment I looked those books over, that Bart Tafflin was robbing my mother!"

"Robbin' his own wife?" Long Sam echoed.

"He certainly is!" Nadine declared. "For every thousand board feet of lumber he enters as sold in those books at the ranch, he sells another thousand he does not enter in the books."

"Yuh shore, Nadine?" the outlaw asked gravely.

"I'm positive, Sam!" she cried. "I hired an old fellow who really knows lumber and lumbering, sent him up there to sign on with my stepfather's crews. The reports this man brought back to me positively confirmed my suspicions."

"You've reported this to yore mother?"

"I don't dare, Sam!" the girl said

unsteadily. "Mother is terribly ill."

"Good grief, girl, I'm mighty sorry," Long Sam said quickly. "What's the trouble? What do the doctors think?"

"Doctors?" Nadine repeated slowly. "It isn't a case for doctors. My mother is dying of a broken heart. Bart Tafflin is killing her, Sam. Poor mother knows him now for what he is—a big, swaggering, self-centered Yankee carpet-bagger who married her, not because he loved her, but because she was wealthy. If I told her that he is stealing from her, it would just be more than she could bear."

"This pay roll, in that strong box, there," the outlaw asked. "That was to pay them loggers?"

"This would have been the third time, Sam, that the pay roll has been stolen on the run down from Sundog. The other two times, my stepfather whined until Mother made the money good. He claims he has all his personal capital tied up in equipment needed for the logging."

"But you smelled a mouse about the robberies, eh?" Long Sam asked quickly.

"I certainly did!" Nadine said with emphasis. "Immediately after each of the other two robberies, Bart Tafflin spent a lot of time in Turtle Shoal, flying high with a flashy adventuress named Babs Willoughby. She owns the Peacock Saloon and gambling dive. I suspected that Bart was having Ned Clay, Kip Riddle, Curly Polk or some of the other hoodlums he hires and calls Stirrup cowhands, pull those robberies. Since the stage was robbed before between the way-station Cole Barton runs and Turtle Shoal, I came here this morning, intending to follow the stage out into the brush country."

"Yuh'd have used that rifle, too, if yuh'd follered that stage and caught a bunch stickin' it up." Long Sam frowned. "And the stage *will* be held up. Only I'm doggoned glad you won't be around there."

That derby-wearin' little gent yuh saw ridin' as a passenger is Joe Fry."

"Joe Fry?" Nadine cried. "Sam, do you mean the famous deputy U. S. Marshal?"

"That's whatever, Nadine." The outlaw frowned. "When Bart Tafflin's boys pull that phony holdup, they're in for trouble, unless they happen to catch Joe Fry plumb asleep."

NADINE'S forehead wrinkled in puzzlement.

"But why all the hocus-pocus of having some of the tough Stirrup bunch risk a holdup for nothing more than an empty box, Sam?"

"Ben Chate probably has his guns loaded with blanks." Long Sam shrugged. "Anyhow, he wouldn't try to hit any of the bunch, for he's in cahoots with 'em. But we'd better start wonderin' what to do next, Nadine. Does yore stepdaddy know yuh've been nosin' into his business?"

"I'm not sure," she said nervously. "He's hated me ever since he started trying to get Mother to hand the Stirrup ranch, land, stock, money and all, over to him, right after they were married. Mother told him that Daddy's will gave the place to me, but allowed her full proceeds from it as long as she lived."

"I can imagine how that big carpetbagger faunched when he found out he couldn't get his hands on the Stirrup," Long Sam said grimly.

"Don't tell Uncle Cole Barton about what I've said!" Nadine cried. "He—still loves Mother, Sam."

"Yeah, I know," Long Sam said gravely. "And yuh're right, Nadine. If Cole found out yore mother is sufferin' because of Bart Tafflin's greed and overbearin' ways, Cole would buckle on a six-shooter and set out to write a powdersmoke prescription that'd cure yore mother, shore enough." He added grimly,

"Somebody'll have to write that prescription, and before it's too late."

"Sam, couldn't we follow that stage?" Nadine asked.

"If that pesky Joe Fry wasn't on the stage, I'd foller it, and deal that bunch a surprise." Long Sam scowled. "But I don't want any tanglement with that derby-wearin' little squirt."

"Stop trying to pretend I'm a child, Sam," Nadine said peevisly. "You call me youngster, yet there's no long, white beard dangling from your chin. And don't try to pretend that you're not puzzled over that business of the strong boxes being switched, either."

"Dog-goned if yuh haven't grown up a lot in the past five years, Nadine." Long Sam grinned.

She grinned back at him. "I was eighteen when you quit visiting the Stirrup. I'm twenty-three now, and you're perhaps ten years my senior, if that much. So stop trying to brush me aside as just small fry who got in your way."

"In other words, yuh don't aim to go home as I want yuh to, do yuh?" Long Sam asked uneasily.

"I don't, Sam, so stop looking like a thundercloud." Nadine laughed. "I like your notion of someone writing a powdersmoke prescription to cure my mother, and I've an idea who will do the writing. So I'm staying with you, even if I'm not welcome."

"I've got no time to argue, so let's go," Long Sam grumbled. "Only yuh'll have to ride behind me, this time. We're goin' up to the station to see Cole and give him this strong box, and old Sleeper will travel better if he knows I have hold of the reins."

They mounted, moved up the canyon, then across the heavily timbered flats at a good clip. The outlaw was looking down at the metal strong box, eyes moody, as

they approached the stage station. He would have ridden on into the clearing, unaware of danger, if Nadine had not called out sharply.

"Sam, wait!"

He felt her grab his shoulders as he hauled in on the reins.

"Judas!" he grumbled "Cole has company, and I blamed near stumbled right out into the open."

There were three saddled horses standing behind the stage station, and Long Sam's eyes narrowed when he noted the horses were sweat-drenched from recent hard travel.

"That big black gelding with the fancy saddle is Bart Tafflin's favorite mount!" Nadine said tensely. "The chunky buckskin is Ned Clay's best roping horse, and that gray belongs to Kip Riddle. Sam, what shall we do?"

"Easy!" the outlaw said sharply, and rode off at a fast trot, heading for a thick stand of fuzzy young pines at the edge of the clearing.

"I hope they didn't sight us, Sam," Nadine said shakily as they halted in the thicket.

"If they had, there'd have been some fuss raised," the outlaw said. "Hop down, Nadine."

LONG SAM tossed split reins over Sleeper's head, then swung out of saddle and lifted the strong box from the saddle-horn, balancing it on his shoulder.

"I'm scared, Sam!" Nadine said. "Bart Tafflin hates Uncle Cole, and wouldn't be here on a friendly call."

"Uh-huh, I figger it that way, too," Long Sam droned. "You stick here. No matter what yuh see, hear or think, stay in this thicket till I call yuh, or Cole Barton calls yuh. Understand?"

"Don't worry!" Nadine shuddered. "If Bart Tafflin saw me, he might take his

quirt to me, as he threatened to do if he ever caught me around Uncle Cole. But what are you going to do, Sam?"

"Me? Why, turn this box over to Cole Barton, of course."

"But you can't do it now!" Nadine cried. "If you go up there, carrying that box, Bart and his men will make trouble for you!"

"Let me worry about that," the gaunt outlaw said gravely.

Long Sam turned before she could argue further, boring through the thicket to the edge of the clearing. He steadied the strong box on his shoulder with his left hand, and kept his supple right hand close to the black butt of the six-shooter on his thigh as he went out across the clearing at a rapid walk, eyes coldly alert.

Nothing moved around the stage station, and even the three weary horses paid him no attention as he skirted past them, then moved to the door of a lean-to that served as a kitchen. He waited there a moment, head cocked to one side, holding his breath as he listened. Hearing nothing, he gently eased the kitchen door open, stepped inside where the odors of recently cooked food and coffee assailed his nostrils. He heard voices, muffled and indistinct, coming from the main log building, beyond the lean-to.

Long Sam crossed the kitchen to a plank door, put the strong box down to the floor against the wall, and pulled the door open a cautious crack. His narrowed eyes grew cold and hard, and suddenly a range dirge hummed softly from the flaring nostrils of his long, thin nose. And anyone who knew Long Sam Littlejohn even passably well would have realized that the softly hummed dirge meant that he was suddenly fighting mad!

Out there in the long room that served as combination depot and lunch room, lanky Cole Barton was backed against the

log wall, his hair disheveled, his face white and twisted with pain and anger that made his steady dark eyes too bright. Barton's left arm hung limply at his side, and the shirt sleeve was bloody from shoulder to cuff.

Standing before Cole Barton, with death in their hot eyes, were Bart Tafflin, Ned Clay, and Kip Riddle.

"I'll give you one more chance, Cole," Bart Tafflin said slowly. "Like we've told you, the stage was held up a couple of miles below here just at daylight this mornin'. Ben Chate, the guard, was killed by three bandits. The teams spooked and upset the stage. The three bandits grabbed the strong box and hightailed. Kip, Ned and me, on our way up from Turtle Shoal to ride gun-guard on that stage the rest of the way to town, heard the shootin' and got there fast as we could."

"And yuh claim yuh trailed them three bandits up here, and that yuh saw the strong box busted open and emptied at my woodpile!" Cole Barton said coldly. "Yuh say yuh pressed on, tryin' to pick up the sign of them bandits, but couldn't find where they had rode away from here. And yuh also claim, Bart, that the busted strong box yuh say yuh seen at my woodpile was missin' when you three give up the chase and rode back here!"

"That's right!" Bart Tafflin snapped.

"You aimin' to give that story the lie when Ike Nolan gets back up here with Sheriff Lon Varney?"

Tafflin was a burly man, thick-shouldered and powerfully built. He had jet-black eyes and hair, and a flat-cheeked face that was as cold and hard as a slab of granite.

"I don't know what to make of yore tale, Tafflin!" Cole Barton said flatly. "But I do know yuh tried to kill me when I heard you three millin' around outside and stepped to the kitchen door to see who was

out there."

"Twist another slug into him, Bart!" Ned Clay said coldly.

Ned Clay was a stocky man who ramrodded the vast Stirrup outfit for Bart Tafflin. Clay's hair was the color of sand, and eyes that were so pale blue they looked white squinted past a brawl-battered nose that centered a round, vicious face that was as red as skinned beef.

"Ned's right, Bart," Kip Riddle spoke up. "Somethin' has gone wrong. We better play it safe."

RIDDLE was a lizard-thin, hatchet-faced tough, with buck teeth and shifty brown eyes. Sizing him up, Long Sam Littlejohn knew that Kip Riddle, with his high-keyed nerves and sharp, twitching eyes would be a deadly man to face in a gun-ruckus.

But Long Sam was not too much concerned over the gun-slinging abilities of Bart Tafflin and those two Stirrup toughs. The outlaw was grimly realizing that he now had an answer to that hocus-pocus of the strong boxes being switched.

He glanced down at the box beside his dusty boots, a mirthless grin touching the corners of his wide mouth. Curly Polk was supposed to have opened the strong box the moment he received it, to have lifted the pay roll out of it, then left the box. Tafflin, Long Sam knew now, had meant to frame Cole Barton!

"Bart, listen!" Ned Clay yelled suddenly. "There's somebody else around here. I hear hummin'! We better—" Clay's voice ended on a hoarse gulp.

Realizing that he had unconsciously let the dismal tune he was humming grow louder, Long Sam flipped the door open, stood there looking out across the room into four astonished faces.

"Easy, men!" Tafflin bleated. "That's

Long Sam Littlejohn.”

“Howdy, Tafflin,” Long John drawled. “Ned, you and Kip better get your hands off them guns. Or do yuh want me to take this strong box with the pay roll money in it and just sift on about my own business?”

Long Sam’s left hand groped down inside the kitchen door, then came up, holding the strong box. He tossed it out into the floor, and the bang and clatter made Bart Tafflin and his two hirelings jump as if a gun had gone off.

“Sam, where in the name of time did yuh get that?” Cole Barton’s voice croaked.

Long Sam explained, fully, how he had come by the strong box, watching fear and fury twist the faces of Bart Tafflin and his two men. Cole: Barton began grinning, despite the pain in his wounded shoulder.

“Curly Polk, one of yore own men, Tafflin!” Barton laughed jarringly. “How do yuh like that for a surprise?”

“It wouldn’t be a surprise to Tafflin to know that Curly was here to get this strong box,” Long Sam said flatly. “Tafflin sent him here for that. Curly was supposed to take the money, Cole, and leave the box here, so’s you’d be accused of helpin’ rob the stage.”

“You bounty-plastered fool, who’d believe anything you said?” Bart Tafflin growled hoarsely.

“I shore believe him, Tafflin!” Cole Barton said hotly. “No wonder yuh tried to blast me down when I opened the door!”

“Ned, you and Kip take it easy!” Tafflin grinned suddenly. “All we’ve got to do is let the sheriff get up here, and take over. With Long Sam Littlejohn fetchin’ that stage loot back here, it’s a cinch the sheriff will figger him and Cole and some other feller robbed the stage, and that Littlejohn waltzed back here with the loot, aimin’ to split with Cole.”

“Yeah, shore!” Kip Riddle laughed.

“All we got to do is let Sheriff Varney gather these two up, loot and all.”

“Think yuh can get out from under that easy?” Long Sam asked drily.

Tafflin grinned crookedly. “When me and my two boys showed up at the wrecked stage, the driver and some blasted dude he called Shorty Smith were strippin’ harness off a couple of the stage horses, aimin’ to ride to Turtle Shoal for the sheriff and a posse. Stick around, if you’re fool enough, Littlejohn, until they get here.”

“For a dude, that Shorty Smith gent was doin’ some mighty loud hollerin’!” Kip Riddle laughed. “When the stage upset he got his right shoulder dislocated, and the way he was faunchin’ about his gun arm gettin’ put out of commission, a man would think he was a ring-tailed powder-merchant.”

Long Sam glanced at Cole Barton, who looked sick and shaky. His holster was empty, and Long Sam knew he could expect no help from him in a gun ruckus.

“Did yuh know that gent Shorty Smith, Cole?” Long Sam asked.

“No,” Barton declared. “But I’ve got a feelin’ he’s a pretty tough customer, Sam.”

“Just keep talkin’ until the posse gets here, and your neck will be in a noose for sure,” Bart Tafflin snorted.

“Tafflin,” Long Sam said grimly, “you and Ned Clay and Kip Riddle robbed that stage this mornin’, just as yuh’ve robbed it of yore own pay roll twice before. Ben Chate was in on the deal, all three times. But yuh beefed Chate this mornin’. Likely yuh figgered this was the last time yuh’d dare steal yore own pay roll, and had sense enough to know Ben would bleed yuh for plenty. On top of that, you wanted Barton jailed for life, or hung. So yuh killed Ben when you three held up the stage and took that empty strong box!”

LONG SAM had walked a couple of paces out into the room and there was a cold, bright glitter in his smoky eyes as he watched the three toughs before him. Their cockiness was gone now, and they were inching hands towards gun butts, faces pale and tense.

“Boss, this long-legged hellion has got—” Ned Clay began hoarsely, but broke off when Bart Tafflin cursed him hotly.

“Keep your lip buttoned, you fool!” Tafflin growled. “That goes for you, too, Kip. This long-shanked hunk of noose bait is tryin’ to stampede us, that’s all. His word ain’t worth a plugged peso with the law that has put a bounty on his hide.”

“Bart’s right, Ned,” Kip Riddle gulped. “Nobody’ll listen to Littlejohn, that’s a cinch.”

“I ought to let you three go ahead dependin’ on that,” Long Sam grunted. “But I’m sort of behind on my travelin’, and haven’t got time to waste.”

“If you want to catch up on yore travelin’, go right ahead!” Bart Tafflin sneered.

“I don’t aim to let anything detain me long,” the outlaw said. “You see, Tafflin’, that derby-hatted, cigar-chewin’ gent on the stage who called his self Shorty Smith was .Joe Fry.”

“What’s that?” Ned Clay yelped.

“He’s spinnin’ a windy, that’s all!” Kip Riddle snorted. “Such a famous deputy U. S. Marshal as Joe Fry wouldn’t run around lookin’ like no cussed dude.”

“Ned, you and Kip come on!” Bart Tafflin croaked. “We’re gettin’ out of here. I’ve heard how Joe Fry is generally mistook for a drummer or a business man by fellers who don’t know him.”

“Stand hitched!” Long Sam ordered coldly. “That gent was Joe Fry, shore thing. But you three ain’t runnin’ no place, so don’t try it.”

“What are you stickin’ your nose into our business for, Littlejohn?” Tafflin asked harshly.

“Yuh’re about the lowest, slimiest thing that ever crawled the face of the earth, Tafflin!” Long Sam rasped. “Nadine is outside, yonder. She knows yuh’ve been stealin’ her mother blind on that timber deal. Nadine seen Ben Chate and Curly Polk swap strong boxes at the back of this buildin’. She knows yuh stole them other two pay rolls, then whined around her mother until her mother handed over money to pay yore timber crews. A man who’d pull stuff like that—”

Long Sam’s tirade ended abruptly when Cole Barton yelled and lunged at Tafflin. Tafflin twisted half around, threw a fist into the wounded man’s face that knocked him tumbling. But in that second of excitement, Kip Riddle’s hands swooped down, and he was grinning savagely as he tip-tilted open-ended holsters that were slung on swivels, and blasted a pair of slugs at Long Sam.

But Long Sam Littlejohn had seen that coming. He slashed his own hands down, jumping aside as he saw Kip Riddle’s hands grab and tilt the guns. The outlaw flinched instinctively when one of Riddle’s bullets ripped through the slack in his shirt. Then Littlejohn’s own guns were in his palms, and the mournful dirge was coming through his bared teeth as the six-shooters bucked and roared.

“Gun him, Ned!” Tafflin’s deep voice boomed. “Nail the son!”

Long Sam saw Riddle spin and buckle, and was swiveling around on the balls of his feet, smoking guns hunting a new target, when a bullet burned across his left cheek, causing him to lurch so sharply he missed Tafflin’s big hulk. Then another bullet raked the hat off the outlaw’s yellow thatch, and he saw Ned Clay jumping at him, chopping down for a close-range,

sure-thing shot. Long Sam's guns belched flame that seemed to reach out, wipe across Clay's raw face with such force that he was thrown over backwards.

"Blast him, Sam!" Cole Barton's voice moaned groggily. "Don't let Tafflin get away!" Tafflin was scuttling for the door, putting all the power of his thick legs into getting outside. Long Sam's guns bucked, and Tafflin came down, howling in fury. A bullet had torn the heel off one of his boots, and Tafflin flopped around, his rage-twisted face white as he lined up his gun. Long Sam dropped spiked hammers of both his guns, and Tafflin's bullet plucked at his left shoulder.

BUT Tafflin would not bend killer fingers around gun trigger again. He lay face down, and what had been the base of his skull made Cole Barton gulp and turn hastily away.

"Tally all," Long Sam droned, and began reloading his hot guns.

"Sam is it true?" Cole Barton panted. "Was Tafflin stealin' from Joyce? Did he hold up the stage this mornin', and the other two times besides? And was that dude really Joe Fry?"

"Whoa, Cole!" Long Sam cut in sharply. "I've got to get out of here, for that dude was Joe Fry, and he'll be along. Just tell Sheriff Varney what yuh heard me say to Tafflin and these other two, and tell Lon I said to grab that big spur-jinglin' Curly Polk tough, before Curly quits the country. *Adios, amigo*. It'll be some time before I dare drift in for another visit, for with Fry around here I'll have to wet my back gettin' to Mexico. But when I do come back, Cole, if yuh've let some other fast-talkin' galoot beat yore time with Joyce, so help me, I'll cripple yuh!"

"Don't worry Sam, about me bein' so blamed slow with Joyce, after this." Cole Barton grinned wryly.

"That's the ticket," Long Sam said. "And Nadine will help you. She's out yonder in a thicket, probably scared half to death by all this shootin'. I'll send her scamperin' home, for there's no point in her gettin' mixed up in the stir that'll start when the sheriff gets here. But if I was you, I'd drop over to Stirrup before too long. Nadine is shore to see that yuh're signed back on as foreman, and if yuh can't paddle yore own canoe after that, yuh ought to swap your saddle hoss for a sheep hook and take to the hills!"