

*A rider of the owlhoot
puts up a valiant
battle against
suspicion and treachery!*



Bob Logan twisted and swayed

POWDERSMOKE INSURANCE

A Long Sam Littlejohn Story by LEE BOND

OUTLAWED, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive apprehension, "Long Sam" Littlejohn had learned the hard way to be cautious about approaching other humans too boldly. He thought the smartest thing he could do would be to let the man and woman down there in the canyon below him settle their squabbling. Yet Long Sam

kept squatting there on his heels. He was a gaunt, unusually tall man, dressed in jetty black from boots to flat-crowned Stetson.

Even the shell-studded belts slanted about his middle were black, supporting a pair of hand-tooled black holsters that bulged with black-butted six-shooters. The outlaw was keeping his tall body very still, for the Texas sun was not quite down, and

those people in the canyon below him might see him there on the rim, in case they looked up.

But the couple down there did not look up. The man, a short, thick-set, tough looking fellow, was grinning at the slender, black-haired young woman in a way that made Long Sam Littlejohn shake his yellow-thatched head disapprovingly. The girl was evidently afraid of the red-faced, leering man, for she kept sidling away from him each time he tried to touch her.

Long Sam looked at the slope that pitched down before him. It was heavily grown with fuzzy young pine, and he knew that he could get down there without running much of a risk. Sleeper, his big, ugly roan horse, was hidden back in the thick timber a hundred yards away. The gaunt outlaw was on the point of easing away from the rim and riding on about his own business when the girl, jumping away from the lunging man, tripped and fell.

"Got yuh now, Sally!" the man yelled loudly.

Long Sam slid into the fuzzy young pines and went noiselessly down the slope. The girl did not cry out, but the way the fellow kept cussing and blustering, Long Sam was not surprised when he reached the valley floor to see the fellow backing away from the white-faced girl, sleeve bloody scratches along his pudgy cheeks.

Long Sam halted in the edge of the young pines, grinning at the way the black-haired girl was standing up to that tough looking hombre.

"You little hellcat, I ought to box yore ears for you!" the man was saying angrily. "What if I told Tuck that you follered me out there from the Boxed Eight?"

"Go ahead, Bob Logan, and tell Tuck that I followed you out here!" the girl said sharply. "Tuck Ollard is my own second cousin, but he wants to marry me. That's the only way he can ever gain full control

of the Boxed Eight ranch I helped him finance. Tell Tuck that I followed you because you pulled the shoes off four of our best saddle horses and led them out here to this canyon."

"Quit actin' so darned high-and-mighty, Sally!" Bob Logan snapped. "Tuck would take a quirt to you if he knowed you follered me out here."

"I'd take a quirting from Tuck before I'd let you make love to me, Bob!" the girl said bluntly.

"Aw, rats!" Bob Logan sneered. "You make it sound like I was tryin' to act big with you Sally. But I ain't. I been crazy about you, ever since Tuck fetched me and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion down to this Texas thicket country to he'p him run this Boxed Eight ranch. All yuh've got to do to keep me from tellin' Tuck that you spied on me today is just quit actin' like I ain't fit for you to be seen with."

"And all I have to do to be rid of your stupid attentions is tell Tuck why I put those scratches on your face," the girl retorted.

BOB LOGAN cursed thickly and Long Sam could see plainly that the pudgy, thick-lipped gent was suddenly scared.

"What will it be tonight, Bob, the express office?" The girl's voice was low and even, yet her words made Bob Logan jump.

"What in blazes are yuh talkin' about?" he growled, and suddenly his blocky hands were touching the butts of twin guns that pronged out from his thighs in tied-down holsters.

The girl was frightened. Long Sam suddenly saw the terror in the girl's big, dark eyes, and in the pallor that touched her mouth, sun-tinted cheeks. But she stood her ground.

"I'm not the fool Tuck Ollard seems to consider me, Bob!" she said gravely. "I

know that you and Tuck and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion have been sneaking Boxed Eight cattle off the range and selling them to shady buyers. I also know that the four of you are part of the mysterious bandits who have held up the stage three times within the past six months! Tuck and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion and Long Sam Littlejohn are in Los Flores right now, robbing the bank or the express office, or some other place where money might be kept.”

Long Sam groaned under his breath, bony hands dropping down to gun-butts. The plucky girl had gone too far. Bob Logan ripped both guns out of holsters and pointed their yawning muzzles squarely at the girl.

“Sally, I hate to do it, but I’ve got to hold yuh until Tuck says what’s to be done with you!” Logan croaked.

“So Tuck and those other renegades are in Los Flores, intending to pull another robbery!” she said angrily. “They’ll race back here, then all four of them will mount those unshod horses and separate. The horse you rode down here was a blotched brand, I noticed. Tuck, Dick, Littlejohn and Whit will be riding blotch-branded mounts, too. When the horses are found, no one can say where they came from. Isn’t that it, Bob?”

“I don’t know how much of yore talk is just guessin’, but that’ll come out later,” Bob Logan growled. “Where’s yore horse at?”

“You don’t think I’d be fool enough to come out here alone, do you?” the girl countered desperately.

Bob Logan waved the muzzles of his guns, motioning up-canyon. The girl glanced desperately about, but saw no escape from her predicament.

“Break and run again, like yuh done when I sighted yuh snoopin’ around them unshod hosses, and I’ll wing yuh with a

bullet!” he told her angrily. “The kind of talk you’ve been makin’ could put a noose around your neck, Sally. You’re always hanging around old Sheriff Herb Wayne and his wife when you’re in town, so mebbe you’ve already blabbed.”

“Then you intend to kill me!” Sally Ollard said in a choked voice.

“I’ll handle him from here on; Sally!” Long Sam called sharply. “Guess he thought you were bluffin’ about havin’ help, eh?”

Had he looked at the girl’s face, Bob Logan would have known that her surprise was as great as his own. But Bob Logan whirled from the girl. He hunched down and began thumb-fanning the hammers of his guns faster and faster, and suddenly Long Sam was staggering backwards, a numbed sensation along the side of his face where a bullet had raked the skin.

Another slug knocked Long Sam’s hat off, and a third ripped across his right side with such force that he was thrown backward. Then Long Sam was stepping out of the brush, a spitting six-shooter in each hand. Bob Logan’s stocky body twisted, jerked and swayed, then he was down on his back, his empty hands twitching. Long Sam waited there on wide-planted feet, humming softly as the girl ran up to him, pale and shaken.

“Thank heavens!” she said simply. “Whoever you are, you saved—”

She broke off, and Long Sam looked at her soberly. She wore waist-length Levi’s tucked into bench-made boots, a brown shirt that had been built for a boy, and a gray Stetson that was new and bright. She began backing slowly away from the gaunt outlaw, full-lipped mouth gaping. Long Sam trying to act unconcerned, began reloading the spent chambers in his guns.

“Yeah, I know!” he said. “You’ve recognized me from the pictures on the ‘wanted’ posters that cussed Joe Fry keeps

nailin' up to anything that'll hold still long enough."

The girl stopped backing away, an almost guilty look coming into her eyes. Long Sam holstered his reloaded guns, went into the thicket for his hat, then came out, looking sharply at the girl as he put the hat on.

"You're hurt!" she cried suddenly. "Mr. Littlejohn, there's blood all over the side of your shirt, and some on your face, too. And if you hadn't come along that—that man would have murdered me!"

"Get hold of yoreself!" Long Sam commented earnestly. "These scratches on my hide don't matter. The thing for you and me to do is get to heck-and-gone out of here. I spotted a big red horse tied out on top of the ridge, yonder, and left my own roan up there. Let's get to the mounts and ramble."

"But the way that side of yours is bleeding—" Sally began, but broke off when the pound of hoofs drummed through the gathering dusk.

QUICKLY Long Sam reached out, grabbed the girl's hand, and almost yanked her into the shelter of brush along the base of the slope. He kept hold of her hand and went up through the fuzzy young pines, the pain in his wounded side beginning to interfere with his breathing. But he kept going up the slope at a stiff clip.

Reaching the crest, Long Sam broke into a trot while Sally Ollard gripped his hand, gamely trying to keep up with him. Behind them were sounds of horses milling and men shouting. Long Sam kept trotting rapidly until he saw the girl's mount where he had found it earlier, tied to a sapling.

"Get in the saddle, but wait for me!" he said sharply. "Don't make any kind of fuss, or we'll be in trouble."

"That's Tuck Ollard and Dick Hayden

and Whit Champion, down there!" Sally gasped. "I know their voices. They were close enough, evidently to have heard all that shooting. Tuck's a wizard at reading sign and will find our tracks."

Long Sam nodded, whirled into a thick stand of pines, and forced himself to run. He got to his big roan and was untying the reins when he heard horsemen coming up out of the canyon. He flung into the hand-tooled black saddle on Sleeper's back and spurred back towards the spot where he had left the girl, thankful for the rapidly thickening shadows of dusk. Sally had heard the riders coming up out of the canyon and was already in thick timber, walking her horse towards Long Sam.

"Good girl!" he approved as they met. "We'll swing deeper into this timber and keep goin' slow so yore cousin and his pals won't hear us. Be dark in another few minutes, and that'll stop Tuck Ollard from trailin' us."

"We'll have to see about that wound of yours before long," Sally said uneasily. "You're white as a ghost, Mr. Littlejohn."

"I'm Sam to my friends, little lady," the gaunt outlaw chuckled. "And stop worryin' about me."

"Where are we going?" Sally wanted to know, mounting her horse.

"You're goin' home, and you'd better make it fast," the outlaw told her. "I'll see about this wound of mine, then poke on into Los Flores. I want to see sheriff Herb Wayne."

"Are you out of your mind?" the girl gasped as they rode stirrup to stirrup. "Sheriff Wayne knows you're one of the four bandits who have been robbing the stages recently."

"Oh, he knows I'm one of the bandits, does he?" Long Sam asked grimly.

"Of course he does!" the girl said sharply. "The drivers and shotgun guards on the stages have identified you each time

because of your height and the black clothes you always wear. Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal from Austin, has been around Los Flores for three weeks now, hunting you. The descriptions the shotgun guards and stage drivers have given of the bandit leader, fit you precisely, Sam.”

“So I heard,” the gaunt outlaw said angrily. “I was a hundred miles south of here at Firefly, Sally, when I first got word that I was bein’ accused of leadin’ these bandits up here.”

“You haven’t been with the bandits who have robbed the stages here?” Sally asked slowly.

“Give a man a bad name, and everybody starts kickin’ him!” Long Sam growled bitterly. “Of course I haven’t been here helpin’ rob stages. That sawed-off, derby-wearin’, cigar-chewin’ Joe Fry accuses me of every dirty crime committed in Texas. With him around, I’m not surprised that yore sheriff thinks I’m one of the local owlhooters.”

“But why would Mr. Fry accuse you of crimes you did not commit?” the girl asked soberly.

“It’s a matter of pride with Joe,” Long Sam stated simply, reining his horse. “He’s an ace man-hunter – shrewd, nervy, and deadly when he has to be. Joe’s goshawful proud of his rep, and I reckon he’s got a right to be. I happen to be the only ‘wanted’ man Joe ever went after without nailin’ and the blamed cuss considers that a blot on his precious record.”

“Mr. Fry certainly does hate you,” Sally said soberly. “But if you haven’t been up here helping rob those stages, who is the tall, black-clad man the drivers and guards identified as you?”

“Findin’ that out is what I hope to do,” answered Long Sam. “I’ve been around here five days, lookin’ this deal over. A Mexican I knew down the river is here, workin’ on a local ranch, and has been a lot

of help pointin’ out people who are considered pretty tough customers.”

“You know who the bandits are?” the girl asked excitedly.

“Not unless you named them when you told Bob Logan that him and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion and Tuck Ollard are the bandits,” Long Sam replied. “This Mexican friend of mine pointed those four out, and said they’re rated about the toughest roosters in the country.”

GRAVELY the girl spoke, while Sam listened attentively to every word:

“They’re tough, brawling, overbearing and dangerous!” she said. “When my parents died three years ago, and left me with two big Iowa farms, I was foolish enough to get in touch with Tuck Ollard, who talked me into selling the farms, promising to take me in as a full partner in what he described as a paying cattle ranch.”

“I’ve been in sight of the Boxed Eight several times, these past five days,” Long Sam said drily. “It’s as pretty a ranch layout as I’ve ever seen. But unless I’m badly mistaken, the improvements are middlin’ new.”

“When I got out here the Boxed Eight was a clutter of sag-roofed shacks, corrals, trash piles, weeds and brush!” the girl said bitterly. “But cousin Tuck had already whizzed me into a fully executed partnership. I sank practically all the money I had improving the ranch and restocking the range with cattle. I hired Nora Harper, a middle-aged Los Flores widow, and moved out to the ranch as soon as the place had been made livable.”

“You think Tuck Ollard and his three pals are the bandits who have been hitting the stages, don’t you?” Long Sam asked bluntly.

“I think it, but could never prove such a thing,” the girl said wearily. “I was bluffing back there in the canyon, after Bob

Logan caught me snooping. Each time there has been a stage robbery, Bob has pulled shoes off four of the Boxed Eight horses and led them off into the hills. I got up nerve enough to follow him this time.”

“Bandits switchin’ to unshod hosses and scatterin’ after a robbery would shore throw a posse off their trail,” Long Sam said gravely. “But there’s a fifth man in this deal, Sally.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” the girl answered. “I know that Bob Logan has seen to the business of taking unshod horses into the hills just before each robbery was reported. I’ve thought that Logan may have planted the horses somewhere, then joined Tuck, Hayden and Champion to help hold up the stages.”

“Only that theory won’t hold up,” Long Sam pointed out. “To begin with, big Tuck Ollard, wiry little Dick Hayden, that bean-pole of a Whit Champion, nor pudgy Bob Logan, would never be mistaken for me, regardless of how they dressed.”

“And if there was a robbery in Los Flores tonight, and anyone claims Long Sam Littlejohn was leading the raid, I can certainly put a stop to such a tale!” the girl said stoutly.

“Just keep what yuh know to yoreself, Sally,” Long Sam said after a pause.

“You’re actually going through with this dangerous plan to see sheriff Herb Wayne, Sam?” the girl now asked.

“I am,” the gaunt outlaw replied. “Herb Wayne is a tough old lawman, and hates bandits like poison. But he’s fair and honest. I think I can convince him that I’m not behind his bandit troubles.”

“But why run such a risk?” Sally countered quickly.

“Because the minute old Herb Wayne realizes that I’m not the leader of those bandits, Sally, he’ll begin looking for another suspect,” Long Sam pointed out. “And since the gent who has been mistaken

for me, or mebbe deliberately posin’ as me, is bound to be some local man, the sheriff may break this case wide open in a hurry.”

“You’d actually help the law that hounds and hates you?” Sally asked quietly.

“Outside of Joe Fry, not many badge men make a point of pesterin’ me too much,” Long Sam chuckled drily.

“Sam Littlejohn, I don’t believe you’re a bandit at all!”

“Tell that to Joe Fry, then plug up yore ears before yuh hear his remarks!”

“I shall tell it to Joe Fry, and just the moment we get to town, too!”

“Whoa, now! You skitter on home, Sally.”

“Piffle!” Sally insisted finally. “Sheriff Wayne and his wife are my friends. If there was a robbery in town tonight, and people are saying Long Sam Littlejohn led the bandits, Sheriff Wayne will believe me when I tell him how impossible it was.”

Long Sam argued, but to no avail. Sally Ollard was riding stirrup to stirrup with him when they broke out of the timber and went across a meadow towards Los Flores. And long before they were in the town, they knew that there had been trouble of some kind, for the street swarmed with shouting men, bobbing lanterns, and milling riders.

Saddled horses were banked all around the stout log building that was combination sheriff’s office and jail, and Long Sam growled under his breath when he saw a stocky, thick-shouldered gent standing on the steps before the sheriff’s office, waving blocky hands to silence a howling crowd.

“Sam, wait!” Sally Ollard said, clutching his arm.

“Uh-huh, I see Joe Fry, up yonder,” the gaunt outlaw said. “I just want to get close enough to hear him.”

Long Sam swung his horse away from the main drag, circling out through the

shadows until he was at the west side of the jail building. Then he swung back towards the main street, halting in black shadows where he could see and hear Joe Fry plainly. Sally, evidently wanting to hear also, crowded her horse up beside Long Sam's roan.

JOE FRY had shoved a derby hat back on a mop of sand-colored hair, and was still waving the crowd to silence. Fry's button shoes were planted far apart, and his square-chinned, tough face looked hot and angry in the glow of lanterns in the hands of men before him. The deputy wore a neatly tailored gray suit, white shirt and brown tie. He had a cigar clamped in one corner of a mouth that looked as cold and hard as a sprung steel trap.

"He looks more like a successful merchant, than a professional man-hunter, doesn't he?" Sally asked tensely.

"That Joe Fry looks like anything but what he is but has been the undoin' of more than one badman," Long Sam said quietly.

"Sam, I don't believe you hate even Joe Fry!" Sally said sharply.

"Hate Joe?" the outlaw echoed. "Of course I don't. Joe's honest, and takes his job seriously. The blamed runt is a nuisance to me, shore. But if I hated Joe, I reckon I'd do somethin' besides run from the little shrimp."

"Quiet down, can't you?" Fry's voice lifted, sharp and authoritative now.

"Why all this stalling around, Fry?" a man in the crowd yelled: "Them four bandits will be in Mexico with the express office loot while you stand around here gabblin'!"

"Four bandits!" Sally gasped. "The express office was robbed. Then there is a fifth member of that gang!"

"Shhh!" Long Sam warned, watching Joe Fry.

"Those bandits won't get too far!" the

deputy marshal sang out. "I want a posse. But I want only six men. I'm not taking a young army of you out to blunder around and mess up sign. This is once Long Sam Littlejohn and his bunch won't get away!"

"Long Sam Littlejohn shot our sheriff down!" a man roared. "Now you want to blunder around and let Littlejohn and them other three the sheriff caught robbin' the express office get away!"

Sally tried to cry out in alarm over what she had heard, but Long Sam gripped her shoulder.

"Sheriff Wayne's thigh was deeply cut by the bullet Littlejohn fired at him," Fry was telling the crowd. "Your sheriff asked me to take over. I have full and complete authority, and this man-hunt is going to be run my way."

"And if we don't happen to like yore way of runnin' things, Fry?" some fellow yelled.

"Then go to the devil!" Fry snapped. "I'm goin' after Long Sam Littlejohn and his bunch. I'll take six men with me, if six of you want to come along."

Growls and yells told of the crowd's displeasure, but Long Sam had no desire to hear more. He tugged Sally's arm, then turned Sleeper and walked the roan away.

"Where does Sheriff Wayne live, Sally?" he asked when they were well away from the street.

"This way!" the girl said shakily.

She rode at a brisk trot, and a few moments later was pulling up before a brightly lighted house near the north edge of town. Sally hopped out of saddle. Long Sam was lifting his right leg, ready to dismount, when he saw the shadowy figure of a man dart from a lighted window.

Without taking time to wonder why he did it, the gaunt outlaw dropped back into the saddle again and hooked Sleeper with gooseneck spurs. The big roan flung chunks of sod behind him as he barreled

across the sheriff's yard. The man at the back corner of the house, running bent far over, when Long Sam saw him again.

The outlaw's spurs lifted Sleeper to a still faster pace, and suddenly the running man was streaking past a curbed well in the back yard, heading frantically for a woodpile. The fellow was unusually tall.

Long Sam realized that just as he quit the saddle to hit the running man in a flying tackle.

"Let go of me, you blasted fool!" a thin harsh voice rang in Long Sam's ears as he hit the ground, arms locked about the ribby man.

"Sam, what on earth!" Sally gasped, skidding to a halt beside the threshing tall man.

Long Sam did not answer right away. The skinny hombre had a gun in his right fist, and was squirming and kicking to bring the gun into play. Long Sam took a chance, jerked his right arm free, and hit the man full in the face. He got hold of a skinny wrist, twisted savagely, and heard the gun go down to the ground with a dull thump.

"What's the idea of jumpin' me, you blasted whelp?" the thin hard voice rasped.

"Bill Clanton!" Sally cried. "Mr. Clanton, why are you and Sam fighting?"

"Sam who?" Bill Clanton rasped.

"Jones!" Long Sam said quickly. "Sam Jones."

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN got up, bringing Bill Clanton with him. The outlaw whistled softly, for the swaying man before him lacked only an inch or so of being as tall as he was.

"You seem to know this gent, Sally," Long Sam droned. "Who and what is he?"

"I'm Bill Clanton!" came the reply. "I own the stage and freight lines that operate between here and Wigwam, to the north. You'll pay for maulin' me around this way,

Sam Jones!"

"Mebbe I'll pay, or mebbe I won't," Long Sam said drily. "First, let's find out why you were snoopin' around Sheriff Wayne's windows."

"The express office was held up tonight by Long Sam Littlejohn and his gang!" Bill Clanton gritted. "Old Herb Wayne blundered into the robbers while they were cleanin' out the safe, and Littlejohn shot him. I came up to see if the sheriff was makin' out all right."

"By snoopin' through a window?" Long Sam asked coldly.

"Mr. Clanton would not go into the sheriff's house, Sam," Sally said slowly. "He and Sheriff Wayne are bitter enemies. In fact—"

"Shut up, you little magpie!" Clanton cut in. "Get home, where you belong!"

"Bill Clanton!" Sally asked. "Why are you talking to me as if you had a right to order me around?"

"That's a good question, Sally," Long Sam remarked. "But don't wait for him to answer. Just go back along the wall of the house, there, and see if he didn't drop somethin'. I've got a hunch—"

Long Sam did not finish. He saw Bill Clanton's tall form crouch. Long Sam threw a quick left punch that staggered Clanton, then hit him with a right cross that stretched him senseless on the grass.

"Sam, what on earth got into Bill Clanton?" Sally asked nervously.

"I heard him drop somethin' when he seen that I was after him," Long Sam replied. "It sounded like a gun, the way it clattered. A big gun."

It was a gun—an eight gauge shotgun, both barrels loaded with fat blue shells that held double-ought buckshot. Long Sam found the weapon, opened the breech, and examined the cartridges by the light that came from a window in the sheriff's house. Sally was beside him, her eyes wide with

surprise.

“Sam, Bill Clanton meant to murder the sheriff, didn’t he?” she asked tensely.

“That Mexican friend of mine who’s up here told me that Bill Clanton has been doin’ his double best to get Sheriff Herb Wayne kicked out of office,” Long Sam said. “Yeah, Sally, I think Clanton meant to finish the sheriff he wounded earlier tonight.”

“Sam,” Sally insisted. “You think Bill Clanton is the fifth man of the bandits, don’t you?”

“He’s tall enough to be mistaken for me, in case he put on black clothes and masked his face,” Long Sam pointed out.

“But that isn’t enough to make you suspect him, surely!” the girl said quickly.

“No,” Long Sam was obliged to admit. “But take this idea of Bill Clanton wantin’ his own man in the sheriff’s office. Add that to the fact the mysterious bandits I’m supposed to have been bossin’ up here, always know when a hefty shipment of money is comin’ over Bill Clanton’s stage line, and you get another picture. Clanton is insured, so the insurance company has to stand the loss when his stages are robbed.”

“How did you know about the insurance?” Sally asked. “I’ve been here quite a while, and have not heard anything like that.”

“This Mexican friend of mine told me,” Long Sam said. “Call him Pablo, for the sake of havin’ a handle for him. Pablo works on a ranch up here, as I said. But he won’t keep the job much longer, I reckon. You see, Sally, Pablo wrote to me at Firefly and told me I was bein’ accused of ramroddin’ these bandits up here. Pablo happens to be a crack investigator for the insurance company that insured Bill Clanton.”

Long Sam heeled around, walked back to Bill Clanton, and picked the tall man up. He grinned ruefully when he saw the

wicked knife lying there beside the senseless stage line owner.

“Lead the way, Sally,” Long Sam said quietly. “We’ll take this Clanton jigger inside. I saw a gray-haired lady and a pudgy, bald man peerin’ out the window a while ago, so we’ve shore been heard out here.”

“That was the sheriff’s wife and Doctor Hume,” Sally said. “I saw them.”

Long Sam glanced at Sleeper, marking the location of his mount out of long practice. Then he was following Sally around the house and up the steps. The girl knocked at the door, then pulled the screen back and stepped inside, while she held the door for Long Sam. He started through, but whirled suddenly, gave his bony shoulder a heave that sent Bill Clanton sprawling into the middle of the room.

“What is it now, Sam?” Sally gasped.

HEAVILY booted feet hit the walk, and a hoarse voice lifted in anger, bawling Sally’s name.

“Tuck!” she gasped, and shrank back.

“I heard men runnin’ up the street towards this place,” Long Sam said. “Get the doctor and Mrs. Wayne to help yuh guard Bill Clanton, and don’t any of yuh stick yore heads outside until I tell yuh it’s safe.”

Long Sam was already backing out the door. He jumped aside, flattening against the wall, facing three men who came lurching towards the steps.

“Sally, you come out here!” Tuck Ollard roared, and started up the steps.

“Hold it, you!” Long Sam snapped.

Tuck Ollard came to a halt, sweat streaming down his face. The lamplight was reaching him now and Long Sam could see the man’s eyes probing the shadows.

“Whoever yuh are, keep yore snoot out of family affairs, feller!” Tuck Ollard

called out. "I'm here to bring Sally home, where she belongs. I had a hunch to look for her up here."

"What do yuh want with Sally?" Long Sam asked. He glanced now at the wiry little Dick Hume, who had stepped off to big Tuck Ollard's right. Skinny Whit Champion moved a pace to Ollard's left.

"We'll keep Buster, up there, from gettin' frisky, Tuck," Dick Hume said thinly. "Go on in, and waltz that filly out of there. We've got to know what happened out yonder where I found that quirt of hers."

"This tall cuss that backed out the door threwed the body of another feller down on the floor inside, Tuck," Whit Champion said gruffly. "Get along and gather up the gal. But take a look at the feller on the floor in there while you're at it."

"Mr. Jones, be careful!" Sally's voice called from inside the house. "That pesky quirt of mine has me trapped. That is the one I tried to use on Bob Logan when he caught me snooping. I—I forgot all about it."

"Snoopin', was you?" Tuck Ollard bawled.

"That's enough, four-flusher!" Long Sam said coldly. "The game's up, Ollard. I left Bob Logan out yonder in that canyon where you three found him. That thing on the floor in there is Bill Clanton, the brains of yore sneaky little bandit gang."

"Tuck, we better make this fast and sudden!" Dick Hayden gulped.

"Me and Dick will take this gent out here, Tuck!" Whit Champion rapped the words out. "You get the filly."

"Simmer down, you two!" Tuck Ollard snorted. "This feller's talk don't make no sense. Long Sam Littlejohn and three other owlhooters held up the express office tonight, and got off with a batch of cash money. Bob Logan, one of my Boxed Eight

riders, bumped into the fleein' outlaws, and got killed tryin' to stop them."

"But Sally's quirt bein' out there where you found Bob Logan sorta complicates things, eh, Tuck?" Long Sam asked gravely.

"Bob's body is layin' yonder on the road, less than a mile from town," Tuck Ollard hooted. "He bumped into them outlaws and was killed, right there. I found Sally's quirt out on the Boxed Eight range."

"Well, I've already made one mistake, looks like," Long Sam drawled. "I figgered Bill Clanton was the brains of yore bandit gang. But as fast and smooth as yuh can lie, mebbe you're the brains behind the bandit shenanigans, Tuck. Yuh moved Logan's body, eh?"

"Quit shootin' off yore mouth and step out here where we can look yuh over," Tuck Ollard snorted. "Come out into the light before—Who's hummin' that funeral music?"

"I was hummin'," Long Sam said flatly. "I've got a habit of hummin' that tune when I'm mad. And you're makin' me mad, Tuck. Shed yore gun belts, and do it careful. That goes for Dick Hayden and Whit Champion, too. I owe you three a killin', so don't tempt me."

"You some kind of a lawman, Jones?" Tuck Ollard asked slowly.

"I'm not a lawman, although I do sometimes dish out what you might call powdersmoke insurance against buzzards like you three runnin' over decent people," Long Sam declared. "And my name isn't Jones."

"Whatever yore name is, it'll be on a tombstone, if yuh don't pipe down and mind yore own business," Dick Hayden said angrily.

"Get on in there and fetch the girl, Tuck," Whit Champion insisted. "Dick and

me will take care of Big Shorty, in case he wants to get ringy.”

“Don’t try it, Tuck,” Long Sam said coldly.

“Who in thunder are you, and what’s got yore bristles up at us boys?” Tuck Ollard asked angrily.

“I’m put out with you three because you’ve, been helpin’ Bill Clanton lay a batch of sneakin’ robberies onto me,” Long Sam said harshly. “The name, Ollard, is Littlejohn—Long Sam Littlejohn!”

DICK HAYDEN’S weapons cleared leather first, spewing fire and smoke as the wiry gunman scuttled for the shadows. Whit Champion’s twin .45s cut loose a second later. Long Sam dug for his own weapons, while Tuck Ollard got the slack out of his jaw and hopped backwards off the steps, big hands swinging to the cedar grips of twin pistols.

But Long Sam was not watching Tuck Ollard just then. The outlaw’s guns came up and out in a smooth motion, spitting flame. He saw a bullet slap into Dick Hayden’s grinning mouth. At the same instant a slug ripped Long Sam’s left thigh, knocking him hard against the wall. He steadied himself with braced shoulders and caught Whit Champion with a double burst of gunfire that knocked the skinny tough spinning down.

Tuck Ollard was hunkered beneath the porch ledge, slanting his guns up, shooting at the flashes of Long Sam’s weapons. The gaunt outlaw felt a bullet fan his cheek, and heard another hit the wall less than a foot from his head. He slanted his guns down and let the hammers skid out from beneath his thumbs in unison, the double roar of

them blending with a shot from Tuck Ollard’s right hand Colt.

Long Sam reeled from the sting of a bullet burning his neck, lost his footing when his wounded leg gave way, and hit the porch rolling. He reared up with both guns cocked, but knew suddenly that he would not have to let the hammers fall again. Tuck Ollard was sprawled out there lifeless in a swath of lamplight.

Long Sam hastily reloaded his weapons, then got to his feet and limped off the porch. He stood there for a moment, sick and swaying, his eyes grimly studying each sprawled form. Sadly he shook his head, then went on around the house and out to where Sleeper stood.

A lot of people had heard the shooting and were coming up from town, their voices lifting in excitement. Long Sam crawled aboard his horse, then rode back past the house.

“All right, Sally!” he called. “Good luck with that ranch of yores, little lady.”

“Sam, wait!” the girl called.

But Long Sam did not wait. The crowd was getting close now, and he walked Sleeper off into the shadows. Out there in the deep pine timber, where he had camped the past five days, there was a cold spring where he could wash his wounds, and an undershirt he could use for bandages. He would be stove up for a while, and it would be mighty lonesome out there at the hidden spring.

But a man with a price on his head, Long Sam thought bitterly, had to face things like that. He touched Sleeper with rowels and rode a little faster, yet not making much sound as he slipped away into the night.