

LONG SAM LEND A HAND



"Sorta off your home range, aren't you, Ike?" drawled Long Sam

Littlejohn takes a trouble trail to foil a range plot!

by LEE BOND

SOME time during the hot, black night that was now fading into gray dawn the weariness in Long Sam Littlejohn had gone beyond physical agony. He was simply numb now—numb of mind and body. Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn knew full well the danger of riding down this open trail through the Texas dawn in

his present condition.

But stopping was out of the question. Somewhere on his back-trail came derby-wearing, cigar-chewing Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin.

Long Sam sighed heavily, pulled some of the slump out of his gaunt, unusually tall body. A narrow, timber-choked valley lay before him now. Shadows still clung in thick folds, however, and he could see no

distinguishing landmarks.

"But this would be Hominy Creek," he said aloud. "Twenty miles, at least, to the first fringes of the thickets of pear and tornillo down along the Rio! Reckon you can keep goin' until we get to those thickets, Sleeper?"

Long Sam shook his yellow-thatched head slowly, blood-shot eyes studying the gloomy timber around him. Sleeper was far more weary than he had realized. The tough old roan might last another hour, with careful handling. But he could never make it to the safety of those towering, thorn-armored thickets down along the Rio Grande without first resting and grazing.

"It's only five miles, about, straight down this Hominy Creek valley to the head of Comanche Basin, where Dave Benton's Circle B range lays," Long Sam groaned. "We could make it down there, easy. Only that sawed-off Fry hellion knows Dave Benton and me are friends, and will go larrupin' to the Circle B to see if we went there."

Long Sam reined in at the ford, swung stiffly out of the hand-tooled black saddle on Sleeper's back, and let the roan drink. The outlaw stretched out on the gravelly shore, filled his own empty stomach with the cool water. Then taking off his black Stetson he ducked his yellow-thatched head into the water, feeling the chill of it sting life into his weary body. He was drying his gaunt face and dripping hair on a blue bandanna when he heard a rider coming in from the south, pushing his horse down the slope at a reckless pace.

Long Sam jumped to his feet, tugged his Stetson on over wet hair, and stepped into Sleeper's saddle. He turned the roan off into the timber, riding downstream at a careful walk. Full daylight had come now, yet there were black shadows here beneath the live oak and sycamores along the stream.

"Likely just some cowhand," the outlaw muttered. "But a bounty-plastered galoot like me can't take things like that for granted."

The rider was off the slope now, the rich loam of the creek bottom deadening the sounds of his mount's hoofs to muffled thumping. Long Sam canted his head, grinning a little when he thought of the splashing that running horse would do when it hit Hominy Creek ford. Only there was no splashing. About the time the horse should have hit the water, all sounds in the valley ceased. "What in thunder!" Long Sam muttered.

The outlaw fidgeted, wishing he had ridden further down the creek. He was only fifty yards or so from the ford, although he could not see the trail nor the crossing for the thick timber. From boots to flat-crowned Stetson he had dressed in jetty black, and knew that he would be hard to spot, here in the thick shadows. But his bony hands slid down, wrapped around the black butts of a pair of matched .45s as he waited.

LONG SAM suddenly stiffened with new uneasiness. Another rider was coming toward Hominy Creek now, riding down the same slope Long Sam had come down, only a few moments earlier. And the rider was coming at a reckless pace, too!

Again Long Sam began listening for the roaring splash of a running horse hitting the ford. And it came this time, along with the nervous snorting of a high-strung horse, and the startled cursing of a man who had taken more of a ducking than he wanted.

Then a rifle threw a single, ringing shot into the morning quiet, and Long Sam Littlejohn heard the sodden slap of the bullet as it struck some yielding thing. He heard, too, the strangled cry of a man hard

hit, and suddenly Littlejohn was running up through the shadowy timber.

But Long Sam was not crowding his luck too hard. He slowed down, advancing at a walk. Then he could see the ford, and his bloodshot eyes were narrow, red slots as he watched a stocky, round-faced man brace sturdy legs and hang desperately to the bridle reins of a tall, sorrel gelding that was trying to break away from him. And there on the edge of Hominy Creek, face down in the shallow water, lay another man.

“A bushwhackin’, sure as thunder!” Long Sam droned. “And the gent out there tryin’ hang onto that sorrel is Ike Lufkin, or I miss a guess. The way Ike keeps gogglin’ at the saddlebags behind that sorrel’s saddle likely explains why he bushwhacked that gent, too!”

Long Sam slid over a bank, eased down into knee-deep water, and waded Hominy Creek. He crawled up into the bottom on the far side, moving in behind a fringe of brush, his eyes alert. Ike Lufkin had the sorrel quieted down, and was frantically unfastening the saddle bags.

“Come to papa!” Lufkin chortled as he got the saddlebags loose.

HE KICKED the sorrel in the belly, laughed when it leaped away. Then Lufkin squatted on his heels, ripped the saddlebags open in nervous haste, and began laughing in a strange hacking sound as he dug out packets of paper money.

“Six bundles, and thirty thousand dollars, cold cash!” Lufkin almost shouted. “South America, here I come.”

“How about takin’ a little side trip to hell, Ike?” Long Sam Littlejohn’s voice was like a dull file, scraping over hard metal.

Ike Lufkin spilled the packets of money to the ground, jerking up and around in a single, violent movement. His

blocky hands flung down to the butts of holstered pistols, but stopped short of the walnut grips.

“Long Sam Littlejohn, by thunder!” he hollered.

“Sorta off yore home range, aren’t yuh, Ike?” Long Sam drawled.

“What do yuh mean by that?” Lufkin countered, glancing around uneasily.

“Last account I had, you and Bob Pardee and Bill Rankin had a hideout over yonder in the Anacaho Mountains some place, and were tryin’ to build yoreselves a tough rep as stage robbers,” Long Sam snorted.

“Me and Bill Rankin and Bob Pardee quit the stage line—uh—business two years ago!” Lufkin grunted. “We come over here to give Jay Simpson a hand with his Rockin’ S outfit.”

“Jay Simpson?” Long Sam shook his head. “I never heard of him or his Rockin’ S.”

“Jay Simpson’s Rockin’ S covers the upper half of Comanche Basin,” Lufkin scowled.

“Comanche Basin has belonged to old Dave Benton since I can remember!” Long Sam snapped. “Dave’s Circle B cattle are the only critters that ever grazed there.”

“Old Dave Benton run into some hard luck, right here at this ford, more than two years ago!” Lufkin grunted. “He was comin’ back from Kansas with forty thousand dollars, cash money, in his jeans when some feller up and twisted a rifle bullet through him for the beef money he was packin’. After that, the Circle B went to pot.”

“What about Dave’s family?” Long Sam asked sharply.

“Benton’s wife was ailin’ when he was killed, and died a couple of months later,” Lufkin said glowering. “Young Pete Benton then had taken charge of the Circle B, and whooped off what cash money his

daddy had left in the Cricket bank.”

“What about Kate Benton, Pete’s sister?” Long Sam growled. “She’s a few years older than Pete, and level-headed as they come. Couldn’t Kate keep that fool Pete from wreckin’ the Circle B?”

“A court give Pete full say-so!” Lufkin snorted. “If Kate has ary grain of sense in that purty head of hers, she’ll go ahead and marry up with Jay Simpson. Now that Pete ain’t under foot to keep her faunchin’, she may do it, too.”

“Somethin’ happened to young Pete?” Long Sam barked the question harshly.

Ike Lufkin paled, his stock body suddenly stiff. He jerked thick lips into a hard line, obviously intending to say nothing. But his pale eyes swiveled in their sockets, touched the dead man lying there in the water at the ford.

“Yuh’ve murdered young Pete Benton!” Long Sam said slowly.

“I killed Pete Benton!” Ike Lufkin said flatly. “Here at my feet is thirty thousand dollars, cash money, Littlejohn. I’m pickin’ that money up, and headin’ for South America with it.”

“Yuh’re in this on your lonesome, Ike?” Long Sam asked slowly.

“On my lonesome!” Lufkin grinned crookedly. “Jay Simpson and Bill Rankin are playin’ it cautious, takin’ their sweet time about settin’ out to make the kind of money they could be makin’. Bob Pardee sees eye to eye with them, too. But me, I ain’t a patient man. When Jay Simpson let that swaggerin’ Pete Benton ramrod a pool herd up to the Kansas market, I seen a chance to make the South America stake I’ve been honin’ for. So I’ll pick up the marbles and be movin’ down to—Hey, Pete’s movin’!”

Thinking it over afterward, Long Sam Littlejohn knew that only his fatigue-dulled mind caused him to fall for such a stunt. But he did fall for it, jerking half

around, eyes whipping to Pete Benton’s body there in the edge of the water. He heard Ike Lufkin’s jolting laughter then, and knew that he had been tricked. But Lufkin’s guns were out, the thundering of their shots filling the narrow valley.

Long Sam flipped his own sixes from holsters, his thumbs raking back spiked hammers as he whirled. A bullet burnt a blister on the right side of his neck, another stung the top of his left shoulder lightly, and a third gashed the tip of his right shoulder. Long Sam’s left hand six-shooter blasted then, and that was the only shot he fired. He stood there, humming a doleful range dirge, watching Ike Lufkin pitch down, eyes bugged out in terror as he threw away smoking guns and clamped both hands to a bloody spot on the front of his shirt.

“Sam, pull these boots off my feet!” Lufkin gasped.

“Why?” the gaunt outlaw countered.

“You’re slug skewered me – went plumb through!” Lufkin panted.

“I know that,” Long Sam shrugged.

He holstered his right hand Colt, then reloaded the spent chamber in the other gun and holstered it. He walked over, kicked Ike Lufkin’s six-shooters into the creek, then squatted on his heels, picked up the six neatly bound packets of paper money, and shoved them inside the front of his shirt. Ike Lufkin started to protest, but choked, rolled over on his side, and coughed up a mouth full of blood.

“My boots, Littlejohn!” he croaked. “Get ‘em off. When I was just a button, back in my home town, a snivelin’ preacher told me I’d die with my boots on, unless I changed my ways. I want to make a liar out of that skypilot, Sam.”

“What I ought to do is kick your ribs in while yuh can still feel it!” Long Sam said coldly. “How do yuh think I like the chore of goin’ to Kate Benton and tellin’ her

about young Pete, yuh murderin' son?"

"Kate'll be plumb happy to know what happened to that swaggerin', loudmouthed fool!" Ike Lufkin croaked.

"What in blazes are you talkin' about?" Long Sam snapped.

Lufkin started to say something, but suddenly his face twisted, and his head jerked down. He coughed hard for a moment, then stretched out on his side, growing silent. Long Sam shook him, then pushed him over on his back. The gaunt outlaw stood up slowly. Ike Lufkin had not made a liar out of that preacher back in his home town, after all.

"Joe Fry will land a-straddle of me if I don't watch out," Long Sam sighed wearily.

He shuddered, dreading the task of breaking the news of her brother's violent death to Kate Benton. He sent Sleeper down the creek at a walk, the dread in him growing as he followed the stream's crooked course through the hills to the upper end of the vast, bowl-shaped range known locally as Comanche Basin.

He swung west at the basin's head, keeping in thick pine timber back of the rimrock until he was directly above the sprawling log house, barns, sheds and corrals old Dave Benton had built, many years ago. The gaunt outlaw crossed the open strip of rimrock as rapidly as he could, heaving a sigh of relief when he was again riding in timber along the slope that pitched steeply down to the Circle B buildings.

"If I had my druthers, I'd sure druther take a beatin' than tell Kate what I've got to tell her," Long Sam muttered uneasily.

As he drew closer, he saw that the Circle B had run down considerably, but was not exactly dilapidated yet. Long Sam saw no one around the barns or corrals, yet smoke trickled lazily from the kitchen chimney at the ranch house. He was on the

point of riding boldly into the open when he saw three riders.

"Blazes!" he growled, halting. "Another second, and I'd have popped out in front of those three."

RIDERS were swinging in across a broad meadow, evidently having come down the basin along Hominy Creek, where the timber was heavy. As he drew closer to the back of the ranch house, Long Sam's bloodshot eyes were suddenly sparked with grim lights, for two of those men were hawk-nosed Bill Rankin and scrawny, red-headed little Bob Pardee. The third rider was big, heavily built, and wore expensive clothes that were a little too flashy.

"Jay Simpson, I'd bet," Long Sam droned, studying the big man who rode between Bill Rankin and Bob Pardee.

The three horsemen rode into the back yard at the Circle B ranch house, halting when the rear door swung open. Long Sam saw Kate Benton come out the door and down broad, stone steps, halting on the bottom one. She waited there, tall and lovely, the morning sun striking soft glints in her rich, brown hair.

"Blamed if Kate hasn't grown into a beauty," Long Sam mused.

The three men before the girl touched their hats respectfully. Then the big gent Long Sam guessed to be Jay Simpson swung off his horse. He walked toward the girl, lifting a huge hand as if he aimed to take hold of her arm. Kate retreated to the top step, her bright head lifted defiantly.

Long Sam eased a six-shooter out of leather, and got set to blister Mr. Big's south end with a bullet, in case he lunged up the steps after Kate. But the big fellow heeled around suddenly, swung aboard his horse, and led his two companions out of the yard and south along a road that ran to Cricket, eventually.

“Kate’s evidently home alone,” Long Sam mused as he holstered his gun.

He waited patiently until the three departing riders were out of sight, then rode forward. Kate Benton had gone back indoors, but at the sound of approaching hoofs she appeared again, dark gray eyes widening. Long Sam saw her full, red lips part, saw recognition in her eyes as she came flying down the steps. He stepped off his horse, pulled his hat off with his left hand, and offered his right hand in greeting.

“Sam Littlejohn!” Kate cried. “Oh, gollies, am I glad to see you, Sam!”

She ignored his proffered hand, rushed in like a frightened child going to a protective parent, and put slim but surprisingly strong arms around his gaunt shoulders, gripping hard. Long Sam swallowed uneasily, patted clumsily at Kate’s slim shoulder. She was trembling, and he heard her stifle a sob as she clung tightly to him. Then she was stepping back, grinning crookedly up at him as she wiped tears from her cheeks.

“Sorry, Sam,” she said huskily. “I can generally hang and rattle, as Dad used to put it, without letting my emotions get out of hand. But seeing you ride up here, when I need the presence of a real friend worse than—Sam, you’ve been hurt!”

Kate’s voice ended on a startled cry. Long Sam saw her studying the blood stains on top of his left shoulder and on the shirt sleeve at the top of his right shoulder, where Ike Lufkin’s bullets had nicked his skin.

“Bullet wounds!” she said sharply. “And just look at poor old Sleeper. What have you done to him, Sam?”

“I’ve about run the old boy into the ground, that’s sure,” the outlaw sighed. “Joe Fry is hot on my trail, Kate. I’ll have to sift, and pronto. But first—”

His throat choked up, and he squirmed,

wanting to tell Kate about young Pete, yet finding it hard to begin the telling.

“Sam, you’re out on your feet!” Kate said sharply. “Into the house with you, now. There’s coffee on the stove, and it’s still hot.”

“Kate, listen to me!” he protested. “Joe Fry is on my heels, I tell you. I’ve got to get out of here, and quick.”

“Sleeper couldn’t run a half mile, and you know it,” the girl retorted. “But I have a Morgan stallion in a box stall, out at the barn, that can outrun any horse in this country. Inside, and get some coffee, while I put Sleeper on oats, and put your gear on Big Red.”

Long Sam muttered under his breath as he went up the steps and into the big kitchen he had known for many years. He reckoned that he was a coward for not just blurting out the news about young Pete, then riding on. But he guessed the jolt would be hard enough for Kate to bear, at best, and began trying to figure out the easiest way to break the news as he found cup and saucer, then sank wearily down at a table with the coffee pot he had lifted from the stove.

Long Sam filled his cup, and downed the stout black brew without stopping for breath. He filled the cup again, unbuttoned the front of his shirt, and pulled out the six packets of money. Long Sam was sitting there, finishing his third cup of coffee, when Kate came in the back door, her face flushed from hurrying.

“Sorry I was so long,” she smiled.

She came across the room, still smiling. She stopped by the gaunt outlaw’s chair, and stood looking down at the packets of money on the table. She was not smiling now. She looked at Long Sam quickly, a startled something in her eyes. Then she turned, and would have moved away if he had not touched her arm.

“You don’t aim to question me about

that money?" he asked gravely.

"There's a lot of money there, Sam," Kate Benton said gravely. "But where you got it happens to be your business."

"I'm a dog-goned coward, Kate!" Long Sam burst out. "I've been stallin' and fumblin' around, puttin' off tellin' you somethin'. But the tellin' will hurt you, and I hate like blazes to do that to you."

"I've weathered some pretty rough going since you were here the last time, Sam," the girl said gravely. "Did you know that Mother and Dad are both gone?"

Long Sam came to his feet, ran nervous fingers through his unruly yellow hair.

"I just heard about yore folks this mornin', and can't tell yuh how sorry I am, Kate," he said gravely. "And now I've got to hand yuh another load of grief, little lady. It's Pete, this time."

Kate tensed, and something came to life in her eyes that made the gaunt outlaw step back hastily. The girl laughed then, and the sound was so cold Long Sam felt a chill go down his spine.

"Don't tell me something has really happened to that rotten, unprincipled devil, Sam!" Kate cried sharply.

Long Sam brushed trembling fingers across his weary eyes, remembering the remark Ike Lufkin had made to the effect that Kate would be glad to know that Pete was dead. Speaking slowly, Long Sam told Kate what had taken place at the ford on upper Hominy Creek.

SOMETHING in the girl's burning eyes made him squirm constantly, and he could feel sweat trickling along his stubbled cheeks and jaws by the time he finished the tale.

"The money, there, is what I picked up after I'd shot Lufkin, Kate," he finished, hoarsely. "Who owned the cattle Pete took

to market?"

"By any sane judgment, I owned those cattle," Kate said harshly. "A thousand head of them wore Jay Simpson's Rocking S brand, however. Five hundred head of them wore the Circle B iron. Since a court ruled that Pete, being a man, should have full sayso at running this place, perhaps I should say that those five hundred belonged to that murdering, underhanded little rake. But all those cattle—"

"Stop it, Kate!" Long Sam cut in harshly. "Accordin' to things Ike Lufkin said before he died, I gathered that Pete had been givin' yuh trouble. What in thunderation had the boy done that made yuh so bitter toward him?"

"Pete murdered my father, Sam!" Kate said harshly. "He murdered him in the same cowardly, cold-blooded way you say Pete got it himself, and right at the very same spot, too!"

"Jumpin' Judas!" Long Sam gulped. "Girl, do you know what yuh're sayin'?"

"I certainly do know what I'm saying, Sam!" Kate told him grimly. "Mother was ill, at the time. Daddy took a big herd of cattle to the Kansas market. He was returning, with forty thousand dollars, cash. He meant to take Mother to Southern California, where doctors felt certain she would regain her health. But Pete met Dad up there at the Hominy Creek ford, shot him down in cold blood, and took that money."

"If you know that your brother did a thing like that, Kate, why wasn't he arrested?" Long Sam asked, and had trouble keeping his voice steady.

"Knowing something is one thing, proving it is something else, Sam," Kate replied steadily. "And stop calling that sneaking, murdering Pete my brother. He was not, thank heavens, even remotely related to me."

"What's that?" Long Sam asked

sharply. "You claim Pete wasn't your brother?"

"He was not!" Kate said firmly. "Pete's percentage gal mother and tinhorn gambler father deserted him at Cricket, when he was only a month old. Mother and Daddy heard of the affair, took pity on the waif, and adopted Pete. I was almost six years old at the time, and remember the whole affair, quite well."

"Judas!" Long Sam said and scowled. "And Pete knew about that?"

"Yes," Kate nodded. "Some busybody told Pete about it when Pete was only ten or twelve years old. Daddy claimed that was why Pete turned into a scoundrel."

"Pete was around fourteen or fifteen, the last time I was here," Long Sam frowned. "He seemed cocky and pretty full of swagger, but I remember your dad only laughed about it, and said Pete would grow up, in time."

"My deepest regret is that Pete did not get his rotten heart shot out, years sooner!" Kate said harshly. "If he had, my mother and father would both be alive today. And learning of his parentage had nothing to do with his rottenness, regardless of what poor Dad thought. Pete was cheap and low and mean, and all of it was there before he heard any tales of his mother and father. I know, because I grew up with that sneaking little hound."

"Couldn't yuh get yore father to see through Pete?" Long Sam asked gravely.

"If you only knew how hard I tried!" the girl said wearily.

"Your father wouldn't even listen?" the outlaw asked.

"Dad pretended to believe that I was just letting my imagination get out of hand," Kate said, and shrugged. "He told me that he would prove to me that Pete was absolutely honest and trustworthy by telling Pete where and when to meet him on his return with that forty thousand

dollars' beef money."

"You knew where and when they were to meet?" Long Sam asked quickly.

"I did not!" Kate said tensely. "I begged Dad to let me know, telling him I was afraid of what Pete might do. Dad refused to tell me a thing, saying that would not be fair to Pete. I watched Pete closely, intending to follow him when he went to keep the rendezvous. But Pete sneaked away during a hard storm one night, and I did not see the murdering hound again until he returned, late the following day, and said he had found Dad dead at the Hominy Creek ford."

"Did Pete go on any sprees, or seem to have an unusual amount of cash after that?" Long Sam asked quickly.

"Pete did not get a hundred yards from this house for over four months after murdering my father!" Kate said gravely.

"He was so nervous he would jump a foot off the floor if anyone made a noise behind him. And during that time, Jay Simpson, who was just a shady stock buyer and tinhorn gambler hanging around Cricket, then, would ride out here to the ranch about every day. Pete and Jay Simpson would get off to themselves and go into a huddle, and after those visits Pete would be pale and shaken for several hours."

"Jay Simpson had the deadwood on Pete!" Long Sam said sharply.

"Obviously," Kate agreed. "I think Jay Simpson blackmailed Pete, made him hand over every cent he stole when he murdered Dad. At any rate, Jay Simpson suddenly opened two fine saloons in Cricket. Then Jay bought half the Circle B range, and half the Circle B cattle, from Pete."

"Simpson had the deadwood on that murderin' little whelp, no question of that," Long Sam said angrily. "How much did this Simpson buzzard pay for half this

ranch, anyhow?"

"He paid nothing more than a promise to keep Pete's neck out of a noose, unless I'm badly mistaken," Kate spread slim hands.

"But good grief, Kate!" Long Sam growled. "Yuh'd be half owner of this ranch, and would have a say in the sellin' of any part of the range or stock, wouldn't yuh?"

"I thought of it that way, too," the girl said soberly. "Pete threw a fit every time I asked him what kind of a deal he had made with Jay Simpson. I finally went to court, asking that Pete give a full account of that deal, and that I be given at a full fifty-fifty say in the management of the ranch."

"The court ruled against you?" Long Sam asked incredulously.

"Jay Simpson imported a fast-talking lawyer from Houston to represent Pete, and they made a fool of me!" Kate said bitterly. "A stuffy little judge ended up telling me to stick to cooking, sewing and housekeeping, and declared that Pete was the head of the family, being the only living male, and ruled that Pete should be free to handle the ranch affairs as he saw fit."

"I've good cause to know how infernally blind justice can be at times, Kate," Long Sam said gravely. "Because I fought the carpet baggers who seized control of Texas right after the war, I've been branded outlaw ever since, and there's still a bounty on my hide. But bein' bitter over such raw deals don't help. Forget Pete, and as much of the heartache he caused yuh as yuh possibly can. This is still a good ranch, Kate. And maybe we can jolt this Simpson cuss loose from the part of it he claims."

"I wish I could get Jay Simpson out of this basin!" Kate said tightly. "Poor Dad spent many hard years, building this Circle

B into what it was at his death. Do you suppose there might be some way I could legally oust Jay Simpson?"

"I don't know about the legal part of it," Long Sam said flatly. "But this Jay Simpson is evidently a crook at heart, if not in practice. Soon as I can shake Joe Fry off my trail, I'll poke back up here. Jay Simpson got half the Circle B range and cattle by shieldin' a murderer, meanin' Pete. The right kind of pressure, put in the right place, might—

"Jay!" Kate Benton screamed.

LONG SAM whirled, hands slapping pistol butts as he followed the terrified girl's line of vision. The burly man he had seen ride up to the ranch earlier, in company with Bob Pardee and Bill Rankin, was standing in the back door, a six-shooter clutched in one big fist. Long Sam reluctantly let his own hands slide away from gun butts.

"Jay Simpson, how long have you been snooping outside that door?" Kate asked angrily.

"Quite a spell, young lady!" the big man said.

Simpson jiggled the six-shooter warningly at Long Sam, then eased on into the kitchen, his big shoulders hunched. There was an odd pallor beneath the coarse, dark skin of his face, and Long Sam felt the impact of jetty eyes that were perking nervously in their deep sockets. Simpson licked thick lips, looked at the money on the table, then at Kate, and finally at Long Sam.

"Bill!" Jay Simpson called. "You and Bob get in here!"

Lanky, hawk-nosed Bill Rankin came through the door first, agate eyes burning coldly as he stepped sidewise, letting scrawny, pinch faced little Bob Pardee slide into the room. They each had a gun out of leather, but let the pistols dangle

down, holding them carelessly as they glanced at Long Sam.

"Ain't seen you in quite a spell, Sam," Bill Rankin said dryly. "Was yuh bullin', about shootin' Ike?"

"If yuh wasn't, yuh'll wish yuh had been!" scrawny Bob Pardee said acidly. "Or had yuh forgot that Ike and Bill and me was pals?"

"Rememberin' you two second-rate chicken thieves wouldn't have worried me any," Long Sam snorted.

"Littlejohn, is Pete Benton actually dead?" Jay Simpson asked, and there was a strange sound of terror in his voice as he spoke.

"As dead as a human bein' can ever be," Long Sam said bluntly.

The pallor spread under Simpson's coarse skin. Sweat came down his face in greasy streaks now, and he was breathing in quick, shallow gasps, his jumpy eyes glazed.

"The snivelin', yellow-spined little fool!" Simpson croaked. "I eased up on him, afraid to crowd him too hard, for fear he would break, gabble everything he knew, under Kate's constant pickin' at him. Now he's dead, and I'm stuck with a paper that ain't worth the ink—"

He broke off, jerked a hand across his sweating face. He licked thick lips, touched Kate's tense face with a jumpy glance, then looked at Bill Rankin and Bob Pardee.

"Cut up a saddle rope, and tie these two!" he said harshly.

"What's the sense in gettin' ourselves into trouble by takin' Kate a prisoner?" Bill Rankin scowled. "Yonder's yore beef money, on that table. Kate ain't done nothin', has she?"

"You infernal fools!" Simpson roared at his hirelings. "That blasted paper I hold on the upper half of this basin expired three days ago. Now that Pete's dead, and

can't sign a new option, I'm out on my ear, unless Kate can be made to put her own name on a piece of paper!"

"Option?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"That crawlin', whinin' Pete!" Simpson glared at him. "He was so scared I was afraid to make him actually transfer title to the land and cattle I got off him. We've been runnin' an option, which looked better, anyway, in case Kate started some more of her court nonsense."

"I'll be darned!" Long Sam chuckled. "Well, what are yuh waitin' for, Kate? Tell this big baboon to be off your land in twenty-four hours. And warn him that he's not to take any kind of livestock except his own private horse with him."

"You're crowin' a little soon, feller!" Bob Pardee glared at Long Sam. "If the boss says we've got to get you and the gal out of here or lose our taw in this basin, then—hey, watch out!"

Bob Pardee's voice ended on a shrill howl of alarm. Jay Simpson had suddenly reached out his free left hand, seized Kate Benton's slim arm, and tried to yank her toward the kitchen doorway. But the big tough found himself hold of a wildcat instead of the frightened girl he had expected to yank around. Kate slammed a slim fist full into his mouth, then raked sharp nails down his startled face in rapid strokes as he bawled in pain and backed away. And while Bob Pardee and Bill Rankin were hopping out of the way of their crawfishing boss, Long Sam Littlejohn's bony hands streaked out, sprung his guns from holsters, and started those guns smoking.

Bill Rankin wallowed back against the wall, white to the lips, eyes goggling at a torn, bloody thing that had been his gun hand. Bob Pardee ducked toward the big kitchen range, cursing furiously as he ran. He slanted his gun back and blasted a shot at Long Sam, who winced as the bullet

ripped a gash across his right cheek. Long Sam's twin guns spoke in unison, and Bob Pardee flopped over into the big wood box, blood spilling from his sagging mouth.

"Sam, help!" Kate's voice was a shrill wail.

But Long Sam had already seen Jay Simpson shove her spinning, then whirl and dash for the back door. Long Sam leaped after Simpson but yelled in a startled way, skidded all the way to the back door on plowing boot heels. Just as Jay Simpson started out the back door, at full stride, a stocky, derby-hatted man with a frayed cigar clutched in a bulldog jaw, and a six-shooter in one blocky fist, was starting in the door.

"Joe Fry!" Kate gasped, grabbing Long Sam's arm. "This way, Sam. Out the front. Your saddle is already on Big Red."

But Long Sam did not run. He was suddenly laughing, watching Joe Fry and Jay Simpson smash solidly together, then crash down into the yard, cursing and flailing each other with swinging six-shooters. Long Sam jumped out into the yard just as Jay Simpson smashed the top of the deputy marshal's derby in with a swinging gun barrel.

Fry went limp, and Simpson reared up, face purple with rage as he tried to line his gun on Long Sam. But the gaunt outlaw was watching for that. He plunged in, laid the barrel of his right hand Colt solidly across Jay Simpson's skull, then stepped back, grinning as Kate ran to him, her eyes shining.

"Now, Sam!" she cried. "Get out of here, before Fry regains his wits. Hurry!"

"And leave yuh with this mess on yore hands?" Long Sam chuckled. "Not much, little lady. Besides, I want to fix this Fry

runt so's he won't be crowdin' me when I do leave."

Long Sam walked over to the deputy marshal, squatted down, and began searching him. He found what he sought—a pair of shiny steel handcuffs. He rolled Joe Fry over beside big Jay Simpson, linked Fry's right wrist to Simpson's left, then took the handcuff keys out of Fry's pocket and put them in his own pocket.

"Go saddle yoreself a horse, Kate, and head for Cricket," he grinned wearily, getting to his feet. "Tell Sheriff Mort Hinkey what's happened out here, and fetch him back to take charge."

"And you, Sam?" the girl asked uneasily.

"I'll bandage Bill Rankin's ruined hand, and drag what's left of Bob Pardee outside," the outlaw shrugged. "I'll also hunker down out here and have me some fun, listenin' to that Fry runt fume when he wakes up and finds out what I've done to him. But I'll be watchin' the south road, yonder, Kate. When I see dust boilin' up, I'll know you and the sheriff are close. I'll slide out of sight before you and Hinkey get here."

"You won't run away, Sam?" Kate asked, and her eyes were pleading.

"For a few days, until Fry quits huntin' me," he nodded. "But I'm leavin' old Sleeper in yore care, Kate. I'll bring yore Big Red back, and swap hosses with yuh, and sorta check up to see how yuh're makin' out with gettin' all of yore ranch back. Run along now, before Fry wakes up and begins to—"

Long Sam did not finish. Kate Benton put her slim arms around his neck, pulled his head down, and kissed him full on the mouth. She smiled up at him in an odd way, then turned and went towards the corrals, hurrying.