

# Long Sam Collects

By LEE BOND

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*He whirled on the masked man, and again the outlaw's guns beat blazing thunder into the wind and rain*

**What's a Wound or a Pursuing Deputy to Littlejohn - When His Help Is Needed?**

**W**ITH a day old bullet hole through his leg, a Texas rain squall beating him in the face, a deputy U. S. marshal trailing him, and no food for twenty-four hours, Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw, was in about the worst humor a man could be in when he rode up into the hill pass.

The unusually tall outlaw rode slumped forward, shivering from the gnawing pain

of the bullet wound in his left thigh. His bony-jawed face was a sickly white color from suffering and hunger.

The slicker which hung draped over his lanky body leaked in a dozen places, and Long Sam was wet to the skin. He had hoped that the stone walls of the pass would break some of the storm's fury, give him and his horse a few moments rest. But the wind and rain came straight into the

defile, and seemed to gather energy between the walls, beat at man and horse with renewed force.

Long Sam cursed through blue lips, and tried to peer out into the wall of water which gushed down from the leaden sky.

His smoke colored eyes were bloodshot, their lids swollen from lack of rest. He knew that he could not sit a saddle many more hours, just as he knew that the tough old strawberry roan he straddled could not go many more miles without rest and feed.

"Maybe this is the last ride, Sleeper," Littlejohn muttered into the wind and rain, clumsily stroking the ugly roan's neck as he talked.

Sleeper's great splayed hoofs made sodden sounds in the wet trail. The hammer-head lifted, the pin-ears cocked back to catch the sound of the master's voice.

Rat-tailed and sorry looking, that big-hoofed roan. But every badge man in Texas cursed the bronc, and swore that it could make more speed and stand more traveling without rest than any other horse in the country. And Long Sam Littlejohn was thinking of the roan now instead of himself as he rode into the pass.

**F**AR down the slopes beyond the pass lay the mysterious country of pear and mesquite thickets. Down there, Long Sam Littlejohn would be safe from Deputy Joe Fry, or any other badge man for that matter.

Littlejohn knew that thorn armoured land of impenetrable thickets as few men knew it. Once into that country of twisting trails and blind lands, the outlaw could confuse the deputy U. S. marshal, Joe Fry, who rode after him, and hole up somewhere for a few hours of much needed rest.

But Sleeper could never make those thickets. Littlejohn knew that when he felt

the tough roan stagger there in the steep pass.

The outlaw cursed in heartfelt sympathy, pulled back on wet reins until Sleeper slowed to a walk.

"Damned if I'll ride yuh dead, ol' feller," the gaunt man growled. "I'll hole up at yonder end of this pass and swap some gun lead with Joe Fry before I'll—what the hell!"

Littlejohn's last three words were a strident yell as his tall figure went sidewise out of the saddle. Somewhere in the swirling mists of wind-driven rain ahead of him a gun had blasted loudly.

Long Sam moaned in agony when he hit the muddy earth on ploughing boot heels, for the shock of the landing was like a red-hot iron being pushed through that bullet hole in his thigh.

But dazed and sick as he was, Long Sam clawed open the hooks on the front of his leaky slicker, and clamped numbed hands over the butts of two .45s that rode his thighs in hand-tooled black holsters.

He limped into the lee of an upslanted boulder beside the trail, and stood there crouched and tense for long minutes, smoky eyes straining vainly against the gray pall of mist and rain which howled through the pass.

With two thousand dollars bounty posted for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam had naturally figured that some badge man or bounty hunting citizen had taken a shot at him. But no bullet had come even close to him, for he could have heard it striking the stone pass wall despite the storm's roar. And there had been only one shot. Bounty hunter or officer would not have stopped at that.

Littlejohn had been exposed long enough for anyone wanting to sling lead at him to have turned loose a good many slugs. But there was someone further along the pass, hidden from Littlejohn's probing

and weary eyes by the rain.

Sleeper, the ugly roan horse, was standing with slope-hips lowered in a half crouch. The roan's eyes were rolling, and his ears were flattened. Sleeper mistrusted humans almost as thoroughly as did his master, and it was plain to Littlejohn now that the horse caught man-scent on the gusting wind.

"Easy, boy," the outlaw soothed the roan. "Whoever it is yuh smell ain't huntin' us, or they'd have been dustin' my south end with lead when I headed for this boulder. Steady, hoss!"

**S**LEEPER was suddenly whirling, snorting uneasily. Long Sam plunged out from behind the up-slanted boulder, snatched at the roan's swaying reins.

The outlaw cursed the searing pain of his wounded thigh, bony face drawn into bitter lines as he caught the roan and pulled himself up into the saddle. For in whirling Sleeper had cocked pointed ears towards the back-trail, and Littlejohn was reminded of Deputy Joe Fry.

"So that derby wearin' little son is gettin' close, is he, Sleeper?" the outlaw growled. "Well, we know damned well Fry will blast us with lead if he gets the chance, so it looks like we'll have to take a look at yonder end of the pass."

Muttering more to keep up his own sagging spirit than anything else, Littlejohn turned the roan, rode slowly on along the pass, body hunched to meet the thrust of rain and wind. But he did not hook his slicker despite the fact that what few dry patches had remained on his somber black clothing were swiftly being soaked.

The pass made a sharp turn just before opening out on the south slopes, and Long Sam slowed his roan to a cautious walk as he neared the turn. But there was no sound, and instead of dismounting, peering around the shoulder of stone as good judgment

dictated, the outlaw rode around the rock.

A big Concord stage coach and four horses were halted, facing Littlejohn. A squatty looking gent up on the boot was reaching down, grasping the limp shoulders of an hombre who was being lifted up towards the driver by a tall jigger who wore a yellow slicker and a clear beaver Stetson that showed its newness despite the fact that it was rain soaked.

Long Sam Littlejohn knew that the man being lifted up from the trail was dead. He could see the set, white face when the fellow's head rolled, and could see blood that even the beating rain could not hide gushing from the limp fellow's forehead. There was a saddled horse standing beside the stage, and a suspiciously bulky gunny sack had been tied behind the cantle of the saddle on that waiting horse.

Long Sam saw those things in the few seconds it took him to tighten reins and wish mightily that he had not ridden so boldly around the shoulder of sandstone. But Littlejohn's regrets were short lived.

The blocky gent up on the boot let go the dead man's arms, bawled profanely, and watched a Winchester which leaned close by.

The tall fellow in the trail spun, dropping the dead man to claw frantically at slicker front.

Long Sam saw then that the slicker clad man was masked, and that the fellow was backing towards that waiting horse. The stage driver had his Winchester up now, slapping at the hammer with hooked thumb as he raised the gun to shoulder.

Long Sam was humming a doleful tune through strong teeth, and those who knew the gaunt outlaw passably well claimed that hell was due to pop when Long Sam Littlejohn hummed that funeral tune.

"Somethin' crooked here, Sleeper," he muttered, and the humming grew louder as his words ended.

**L**ONG SAM'S hands seemed only to flutter in an uncertain movement instead of actually dipping down, then up. But from the level of his waistline twin jets of burning powder lashed out past Sleeper's flattened ears, and the guard up on the stage boot yelled bloody murder when the stage team lunged wildly forward. The vehicle careened violently, and the driver lost his rifle in a frantic grab for slipping reins.

Long Sam shunted Sleeper aside as the teams and stage bore down upon him, grinning coldly as he watched the white faced driver brace sturdy legs and begin taking the slack out of those reins he'd grabbed. But that masked hellion had his guns free now, and Long Sam felt a slug rip through the fluttering slicker below his right armpit.

He whirled on the masked man, and again the outlaw's guns beat blazing thunder into the roaring wind and rain.

The masked fellow dropped smoking guns, clamped right hand to left shoulder, and whirled on unsteady legs, aiming to make for the sorrel that had stood beside the stage. But the shooting, and the mad clatter of the stage's flight, had spooked the sorrel.

The masked hombre squalled an oath at sight of his mount hightailing into a thicket a hundred yards away, and tried frantically to dash after the fleeing animal. But Long Sam's right hand gun bellowed, and a fistful of muddy earth sprayed up beside the wounded hombre's churning boots.

"Hold it, feller!" the outlaw ordered. "I aim to find out howcome yuh and that stage driver are so chummy. Yore mask, and what I seen tied behind yore saddle, shore hints that maybe there's a fly in the buttermilk. Stand hitched, or—"

The masked man was showing no disposition to stand hitched, as Littlejohn had ordered. Instead, the fellow changed

courses, dived into the brush choked head of a ravine which twisted down the slope towards big moss covered oaks.

But Long Sam suddenly forgot the fleeing man. To his ears came the heavy sound of skidding wheels, the cursing of the stage driver and the uneasy snort of the frightened team.

"Go easy, driver!" a voice knifed the wind's howling. "Put that gun up. I'm Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal. What the hell is happenin' around here, anyhow. I heard—"

Long Sam heard, too. He'd heard enough to tell him that it was time he got out of there. He struck Sleeper's gaunt flanks with dull rowels, and turned the big roan off towards the thickets where the sorrel had vanished.

"If I can catch that sorrel, Sleeper, I'll turn yuh loose to rest," the outlaw muttered. "And if I don't catch that fresh sorrel, Joe Fry will likely have me jail house bound inside of another hour."

**T**HE leggy, speedy looking sorrel was fighting reins that had tangled in a stout bush when Long Sam Littlejohn found the animal. He swung in towards the rearing, wild-eyed gelding, talking to it. The horse was young and green, and the shooting had spooked it plenty. But Long Sam got hold of the cheek strap nearest him, and the gelding calmed down after another plunge or two.

Long Sam saw the Circle N brand on the sorrel's left hip, and his smoky eyes burned when he felt of the gunny sack package behind the cantle of the sorrel's saddle. He loosened buckskin thongs, lifted the package down. He tied the trembling sorrel solidly to a branch, then carried the heavy package to a little clearing.

Long Sam up-ended the sack, and began humming that doleful tune again when an iron box thudded heavily upon the turf. It was a strong-box such as most stage

outfits used for the transporting of valuables. Long Sam shook it, but could hear no tell-tale jingle of gold or silver money. He scowled down at the box, and sat hunkered on his heels for a moment, listening.

The roar of the wind in the brush and trees about him would have drowned out the sound of an approaching army, he decided. But Deputy Joe Fry would be busy back there with that stage driver for a while, anyhow. They would have to load the dead man, and the stage driver would have to tell Fry some tall tale about the holdup.

“That driver, and the masked feller, were shore too friendly,” Littlejohn mused, staring moodily down at the strong-box. “Way I figger the thing is that the masked gent killed the shotgun guard, which would be the dead hombre back yonder. The stage driver and that masked hellion are in cahoots on the deal. But why? This box don’t seem to have any hard money in it.”

Long Sam prodded the box, lifted it, shook it again. But he could hear nothing. And the box was light.

“The stage or express company would be responsible for whatever valuables this box held,” the outlaw grumbled. “But I can’t go waltzin’ up to a stage outfit or a Wells Fargo depot and hand the thing over.”

Long Sam put the box down, tugging thoughtfully at the rather cheap lock which held it shut. He drew a gun, slid the blued pistol barrel through the lock’s looped tongue, and twisted sharply. The lock popped open, and Long Sam holstered his .45. He opened the strong-box then, and suddenly his smoky eyes widened. The box held valuables, all right, for it was packed with neatly tied packets of currency.

Littlejohn whistled, lifted a packet of the money, and riffled the ends of the bills, counting rapidly. A couple of minutes later

he stood erect, an uneasy look on his gaunt face as he hastily stuffed the four tied packets of currency inside his soggy black sateen shirt front.

“Three thousand dollars!” he breathed, “And if I’m caught with the stuff, nobody would ever believe that I aimed to try my damndest to find the money’s rightful owner and turn the stuff over to said owner.”

**T**HE outlaw glanced back towards the pass, but could see no sign of Deputy Fry as yet. Long Sam limped to Sleeper; flung the reins up over the roan’s head, then turned to the leggy sorrel. He untied the sorrel, swung up into the saddle, and grinned wearily at Sleeper’s disapproving snort.

“Quit bellyachin’, yuh ol’ sinner,” Littlejohn chuckled. “Yuh ought to be glad I’m givin’ yuh a rest. If Fry crowds us, I’ll strip the gear off yuh so’s yuh can shift for yoreself a spell. But if he don’t crowd us I reckon yuh can tag along.”

Sleeper followed when Long Sam turned the sorrel and rode off through the thickets. Free of the outlaw’s weight now, the roan stepped out more strongly than it had in a good many hours.

But Long Sam held the sorrel down to an easy pace, knowing that the faithful roan could not stand a hard trip even as nearly unburdened as it was. Long Sam discovered that holding the sorrel in was no easy job, and realized that the horse was trying to bear south with him.

“Tryin’ to head for home, eh?” the owlhooter muttered. “Well, now, maybe that ain’t a bad idea, hoss. If I could get a look at that master of yores when he wasn’t masked, maybe it’d help me figger out this stage robbery business.”

Littlejohn let the sorrel take the course it obviously wanted to take, but held the horse in to a walk, riding through every

patch of brush and over every rocky strip of ground his tired eyes could find. The storm let up within a half hour, and another half hour saw the warm Texas sun reaching down through swiftly thinning clouds.

Long Sam had covered several miles, and knew that his sign was fairly well fogged. He removed his slicker when the sun came out, welcoming the warmth. But as his clothing dried and the chill left his body sleepiness came, and he found himself dozing in the saddle more than once. Long Sam was glad when he finally sighted the little log ranch house that sat at the base of the hills.

The sorrel whinnied, tried to bolt down the last wooded slope. But Littlejohn tightened the reins, halting the horse completely. He sat for several minutes, studying the house and corrals below him.

Beyond the little ranch lay the thickets of pear, mesquite and tornillo, a wild, harsh country of dim trails and blind lanes. But that wicked country was friendly to men like Littlejohn, and his heavy lidded eye kindled when he realized that the safety of those thorny jungles lay so close.

Long Sam dismounted, looped tied reins up over the sorrel's neck, and watched it bolt down the slope, whinnying eagerly. The faithful Sleeper came up to muzzle Littlejohn's shoulder, and the outlaw stroked the ugly roan's neck as he stood gazing down the slope.

The sorrel was out of the timber now, thundering towards the little house. It halted at the corral behind the house, but as the horse had galloped past, the back door opened, and a man stepped out. The fellow turned, gesturing excitedly as he talked to someone just inside the door. Then a woman came out, and the two of them hurried down the muddy path to the corral. They petted the sorrel, walked around it, looking it over.

LONG SAM could see their hands going over the horse, and watched them unsaddle it finally, turn it into a corral. The man shook his head as deeply puzzled about something, and the woman followed him as he carried saddle, blanket and bridle to a little shed. Then they were going back to the house, and Long Sam was turning, reaching for horn and stirrup when Sleeper snorted, shied uneasily.

The roan's head swung, and his ears cocked towards a clump of timber up the slope a few rods. Long Sam tensed, and his big hands started towards gun butts as his heavy lidded eyes focused on the clump of young oak trees up the slope. But the outlaw's hands never completed that down motion. A harsh voice flung out of the oaks up the hill, and Long Sam stood as if frozen in his tracks, cursing wearily through locked teeth.

"Jist hold that pose, long feller!" the voice crackled. "I dunno who yuh are, but yuh've struck that snoot o' yores into another feller's business. Stand steady until I kin read yore brand."

Long Sam Littlejohn was humming softly through his teeth, smoky eyes studying the stubby, thick-chested man who had come out of the oak grove. The stubby gent bow-legged down the slope, a Winchester trained from hip level. The rifleman's wind-burned face was scowling, and his puckered blue eyes were stormy as he halted a yard away.

Long Sam continued humming, and kept his head tilted down until the black Stetson he wore shielded most of his features from those hard blue eyes of the man before him.

"Quit hummin' that damn funeral tune an' start talkin'," the stubby man snapped. "I seen yuh ride that sorrel down here, then turn the bronc loose to go on to Jim Nash's place, yonder. Who are yuh, an' where's Dick Forbin?"

Long Sam had never heard of a gent called Dick Forbin. But he was suddenly guessing that Dick Forbin would be the name of that masked jigger he had shoulder-shot up in the pass where the stage had been held up.

"Yuh a friend of Dick's?" he asked, but did not raise his head.

He was watching the short man from beneath that black hatbrim, however. He saw the fellow's face crimson, and saw the stubby hands grip the rifle threateningly.

"Quit stallin', an' tell me how yuh happened to be ridin' Jim Nash's sorrel," the rifleman growled.

"Maybe Forbin went on yonder to Nash's place," Long Sam stalled desperately.

"Are yuh crazy?" the man with the rifle blurted. "Dick or any o' us other Lazy Q riders wouldn't show ourselves around Nash's Circle N. If we did, he'd tumble that—Say, quit throwin' me off the track an' tell me how yuh happened to ride Jim Nash's pet sorrel here."

"I don't know yuh, and don't know whether yuh've got any business knowin' how I happened to ride that sorrel or not," Littlejohn snorted. "But just suppose I come across Dick Forbin when he needed help. Mind now, I ain't admittin' a thing. But *suppose* Forbin was attendin' to a certain chore, when things went wrong and he got bullet crippled. Maybe he had to take to the brush on foot, and needed somebody to ride that sorrel for him. I ain't sayin'—"

"Dick got drilled?" the stubby man cut in wildly. "Say, feller, git the slack out o' yore tongue an' talk sense. How'd Dick git shot up?"

**L**ONG SAM forced a whine into his voice.

"For all I know, yuh're maybe a badge toter, tryin' to pump me. Dick never—"

"I'm Cleve Moby, an' I've rode fer Dick ever since he's ramrodded Buck Gilford's Lazy Q," the short fellow introduced himself swiftly. "Now will yuh quit beatin' around the bush an' talk sense? Me, a badge toter! That's rich, cowboy. I was waitin' here with Dick's hoss, so's him an' me could hightail when Jim Nash's sorrel was turned loose to lay a plain trail to that damned Nash's door. What happened to Dick?"

"Why didn't yuh tell me who yuh was instead of actin' ornery, Moby?" Long Sam sighed. "Shore, I reckoned yuh was the man who'd be waitin' here with Dick's hoss. But yuh didn't mention yore name, and I didn't dare ask questions."

"What happened to Dick?" Moby repeated angrily. "I still don't know whether yuh're stallin' or not, so talk up."

"Dick stuck up the stage, and plugged the shotgun guard." Long Sam held his breath after that plunge.

But Moby only nodded jerkily, leaned eagerly forward, lowering the rifle muzzle for the first time.

"Shore, that was part of the plan," he snapped. "Dick was to beef Frank Julian, the shotgun guard, so's the charge agin Jim Nash would be murder as well as robbery. But what went wrong?"

"A feller rode up, right smack in the middle of things," Long Sam reported truthfully. "Dick and the stage driver both got hostile, and the gent who rode up on 'em had to sling some lead. The feller shot under the stage teams, and made the broncs stampede, which put the driver out of the fight, since he had to tool them teams through the pass. Dick Forbin went for his guns, and the gent who had happened into the pass at the wrong time drilled Dick."

"Good lord!" Cleve Moby croaked. "I'll have to hightail it, head Gilford off before he fetches the sheriff out here, an' tell him what has went wrong. Is Dick

dead, captured, or what?"

Long Sam chuckled. "I reckon he's runnin' around in the brush nursin' a sore shoulder. I've got the money that was in the strong-box, though."

"Then hand it over," Moby demanded. "Gilford sent the money out on the stage as part o' the frame-up, of course. He owns the stage line, an' guarantees anything the stages haul. So pass over the money an' I'll take it back to the boss. An' if yuh happen to know the sidewinder who horned into that deal up there, name him. The Lazy Q will shut him up. How long have yuh knowed Dick Forbin?"

"Never heard of the son until yuh called his name," Long Sam drawled, and began humming that mournful tune as he lifted his head, shoved the black Stetson far back on his yellow hair.

Cleve Moby yelped a hoarse oath, tried to lift the rifle. But Long Sam's right hand bounced up, and Cleve Moby found himself staring into the business end of a cocked six-gun.

"Drop the rifle, runt, or I'll drop you," Long Sam ordered.

"Littlejohn!" Moby croaked. "Long Sam Littlejohn!"

"Well, what of it?" the outlaw snapped. "An' in case yuh're interested, I'm the gent who rode up into the pass at the wrong time and had to wing this Dick Forbin snake. Elevate, Moby, and turn yore back while I clean them holsters at yore legs."

**C**LEVE MOBY dropped the rifle, and his face was a sickly white color as he turned his back.

Long Sam shucked twin guns from Moby's holsters, hurled the weapons into the timber, then turned the sawed-off tough roughly about, shoved him down the slope.

"Head for Jim Nash's house," the gaunt outlaw ordered. "I don't know all the details of this mess, but I've heard enough

to know that this Nash hombre has been framed for robbery and murder. Rattle yore hocks, Moby, or I'll toss a rope over yore neck and drag yuh."

Moby cursed and fumed, genuine alarm in his voice and eyes. He whirled like a bobcat, tried to bolt into the timber. But Long Sam, crippled, expecting Moby to bolt and knowing that he could never follow the man fast enough to stop him, had already swapped sixgun for lariat rope. Long Sam flipped a loop, snarled Moby just as the stubby hellion was diving towards a brush heap.

Long Sam stepped up into the saddle, took the slack out of his rope, dallied it around the horn, and touched Sleeper. The roan went down the hill, Moby whirling and bouncing along the soft earth. Long Sam stopped after a few yards, hipped around in the saddle, and looked back.

"Want to get on yore hoofs and walk ahead of me, or do I keep draggin'?" he inquired.

Moby spat out a mouthful of leaf mold, got to his feet, and staggered down the slope, cursing and wild eyed. As they approached the house a slim young fellow with black hair and keen black eyes stepped out through the yard gate, to stand watching them, scowling angrily. Moby halted a few feet in front of the black eyed youngster, quailing under the feel of the rope that was still about his pot belly.

"You Jim Nash?" Long Sam asked the young fellow.

"I'm Nash," came the clipped reply. "What's gain' on here?"

"Comin' here wasn't my idee, Nash," Moby panted. "This Littlejohn heller made me come."

"Littlejohn?" Nash snapped, and shot a hand to the butt of the gun at his thigh.

"Ease off on that gun stuff, friend," Long Sam droned. "Sure, I brought this skunk down here. I also fetched that sorrel

of yores home a spell ago. A posse will maybe track the sorrel here. Yuh'll be accused of holdin' up the stage, murderin' the shotgun guard."

Nash's face had gone pale, and Long Sam glanced sharply around when a sob of fear came from the ranch house. He saw a slender young woman standing on the end of the porch, one hand pressed to her throat, while she stared in terror at her husband.

"Jim!" she cried. "What does that man mean?"

"Don't get scared, Edna." Nash tried desperately to hide his own fear.

**T**HE girl came off the porch, ran to his side, her small hands clinging desperately to his lean arm.

"Littlejohn, some cuss stole my pet sorrel and my favorite ridin' gear last night," Nash growled. "You just admitted returnin' the hoss. Think you can explain matters?"

Long Sam swung down, took the slack out of his rope, and shoved Cleve Moby towards the house.

"We better get inside, folks," he told Jim and Edna Nash. "From what I've got out of this Moby buzzard, Nash, yuh're in for trouble. But I think we can maybe turn the tables, if yuh and yore wife will get over bein' scared and listen to me. And while we're waitin' for Buck Gilford and the rest of his crew to show up, us three will have the fun of hangin' Moby."

Long Sam winked over Moby's shoulder. But Cleve Moby did not know that. The stubby tough yelled in terror, began begging wildly. And as Moby's nerve cracked, Long Sam grinned coldly.

The sun was less than an hour high when three heavily armed men curbed sweat lathered horses at the Circle N gate and sprang out of saddles.

"Good lord, Littlejohn, the sheriff ain't

with Gilford!" Jim Nash croaked.

He and Long Sam were peering out a front window, while Edna Nash sat white and trembling in a deep chair at the far end of the room.

"This puts a kink in our plans, to some extent," Littlejohn growled. "Them three yonder are on the shoot, that's plain. Which is Gilford?"

"That big, sorrel maned devil is Buck Gilford," Nash panted. "The slope-shouldered, bean-pole gent is Dick Forbin. You winged him all right, for his left arm is in a sling, as you can see. That clumsy-looking ox is Snapper Clate, Lazy Q bronc stomper. Littlejohn, we'll never win a shoot-out with them three. They—"

"Get out onto that porch," Long Sam cut in coldly. "Stall them three, keep 'em millin' out there a minute or so."

"I want a gun," Nash growled. "If I go out there without a gun, Littlejohn, I'm as good as—"

"Pipe down before yuh scare yore wife to death, and get on outside," Long Sam ordered. "If them three get into this house, there's no tellin' what'll happen."

Nash moved to the door, and stepped outside just as the three Lazy Q men were nearing the porch. Those three stopped short, hands fluttering down to gun butts as they glared up at the young ranch man.

"We're takin' yuh to town for the law to hang, Jim Nash," Buck Gilford rumbled. "Oce Pendleton, one o' my stage drivers, swears he recognized yuh as the holdup man who robbed his stage to-day an' shot Frank Julian, the shotgun guard, plumb between the eyes."

"That so?" Jim Nash drawled.

**T**HE three Lazy Q gunmen stared at him, taken aback by his cool demeanor. Gilford's rust flecked eyes rolled uneasily right and left, and he muttered something from one corner of his

thick-lipped mouth.

“Say, this squirt ain’t actin’ right a-tall, boss,” big Snapper Clate decided.

“Nash is up to somethin’,” Dick Forbin muttered uneasily.

“Since when did you three get to be the law?” Nash asked them. “You accuse me of robbery and murder, and say you aim to take me to town. What’s your authority?”

“These!” Gilford rasped, and patted his guns. “Sheriff Lew Morgan is away some place, so us three come for yuh. If yuh act up, an’ git shot—”

“I’m not even packin’ a gun,” Jim Nash laughed coldly. “Ever since I tumbled that you and your bunch are usin’ the thickets down yonder to hide cattle and hosses in while worked-over brands heal, Gilford, you’ve tried to run me out of the country. You figure to let the law hang me on a framed-up I charge now, eh?”

“I don’t like this, boss,” Dick Forbin gulped. “Nash ain’t even surprised or sore. He—he’s up to somethin’.”

“He’ll be lookin’ up at the roots o’ the grass if he don’t come along,” Snapper Clate barked. “How do we know he ain’t got a gun hid inside his shirt?”

“So that’s your game?” Nash sneered. “You figure to kill me, then tell the sheriff a cock an’ bull story when you lug my remains into Rio Vista town. But it won’t work, Gilford.”

“Wh-what yuh gettin’ at?” Gilford demanded uneasily. “Yuh robbed that stage to-day, an’ murdered Frank Julian. A jury would—What the hell!”

A doleful humming jerked the heads of the three uneasy gunmen around. They gaped at a tall, black clad man who leaned lazily against a far corner of the house and watched them out of smoky eyes. Then suddenly Dick Forbin squalled like a catamount, dug for a gun with his good right hand.

“That’s him!” Forbin screeched.

“That’s the heller who horned in today an’—”

Forbin’s gun was clear, and the blast of it drowned his own words.

Long Sam Littlejohn sprang out from the corner of the house then, a gun in each big, knotty fist. The gaunt outlaw was humming under his breath as lean thumbs caught, lifted, and dropped gun hammers.

Dick Forbin bent at the knees, dropped the smoking gun, and fell face down in the yard. Buck Gilford and Snapper Clate clawed at holstered weapons, their faces twisted in mingled fear and rage as they saw the gaunt black-clad man saunter lazily towards them.

Snapper Clate died before he could shake out a single shot, and Buck Gilford missed the only try he had at downing Long Sam with smoking lead.

**S**NAPPER CLATE’S big body was still falling when Long Sam whirled, slapped gun hammers with both thumbs just as blazing lead from Gilford’s guns screamed past his head. Long Sam saw Buck Gilford’s great body shudder, twist half around, then wilt in that nerveless manner of a man dying on his feet.

The outlaw came out of his fighting crouch then, reloaded and holstered hot guns, while Jim Nash stood gaping at him from the end of the porch.

“You-you ain’t even hit?” Nash stammered finally.

“Never touched me,” Long Sam chuckled. “But I’ve got a hunch I’d better sift, Nash. Deputy Joe Fry will be along any time now. Or this Sheriff Lew Morgan yuh mentioned might mosey out this way. So I’ll say thanks for the grub yuh fed me, and for the job yuh done on patchin’ the bullet hole Joe Fry put in my leg yesterday mornin’. Sleeper has filled his belly and rested, so we’ll be shovin’ along.”

“Littlejohn, Edna and me are beholdin’

to you the rest of our lives,” the young rancher said hoarsely. “With Gilford out of the way, and that signed confession you scared out of Cleve Moby, my wife and me can live in peace. I wish there was some way we I could pay you for what you’ve done, amigo.”

“Pay me?” Long Sam grinned. “Well, I reckon I’ve sorta been paid already, Nash. Adios, best o’ luck.”

Long Sam was still grinning as he turned towards the corral where Sleeper

had been fed and rested. Long Sam’s fingers were feeling of the lumpy packets of money beneath his shirt—money Buck Gilford had used to bait a noose for Jim Nash’s neck.

“Where Buck Gilford is goin’, paper money would shore burn up in a hurry,” the outlaw chuckled grimly. “So I’ll just hang onto this dinero and try to shake Joe Fry off my tail long enough to get the money into circulation.”