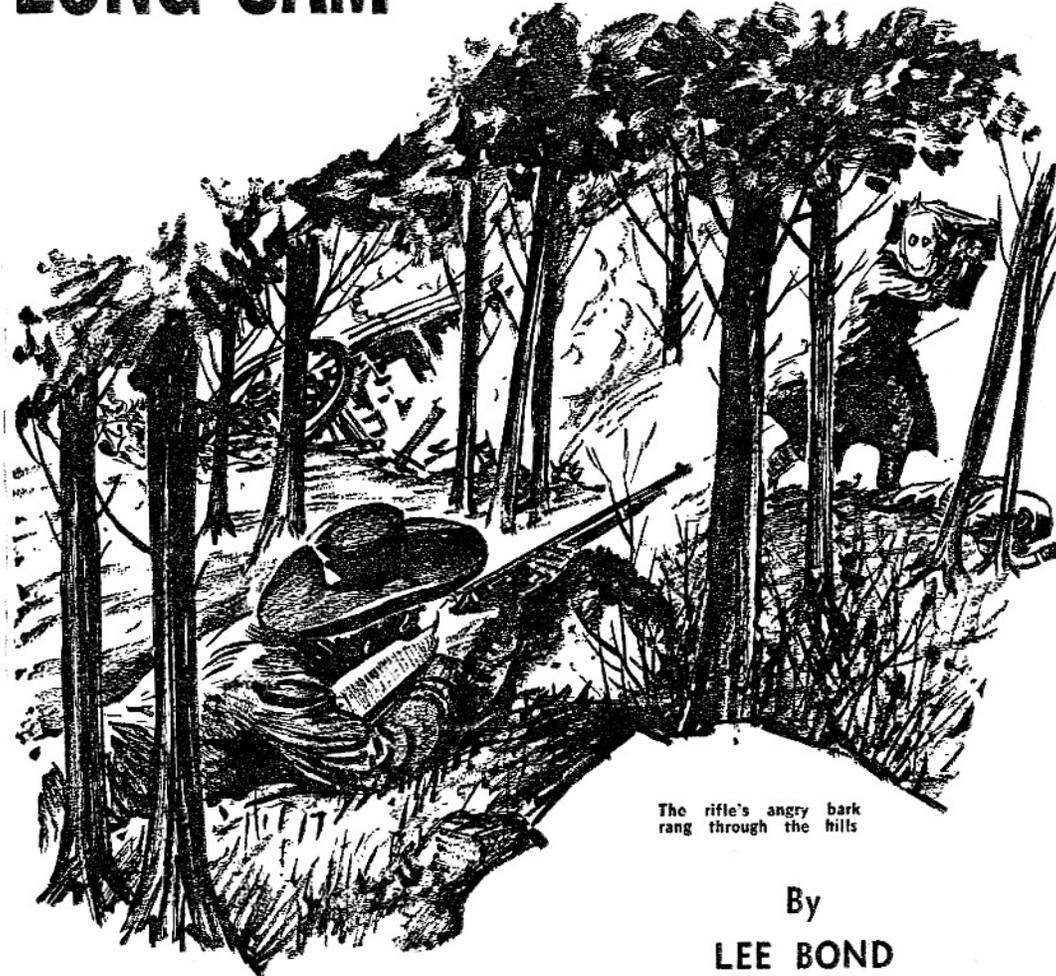


LONG SAM BLASTS THE BLASTER



The rifle's angry bark
rang through the hills

By
LEE BOND

*When a vicious desperado blows up his fifth stagecoach,
Littlejohn goes on the hunt for some scheming hombres!*

IT WAS like something from a horrifying dream, something so inhuman, so brutally cruel, that even the case-hardened nerves of Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw, were unstrung. One moment the shiny, red-and-yellow stagecoach had been whizzing along the canyon floor, the six horses galloping eagerly towards Blue Bend and the feed and rest that waited them there. Then the stagecoach was whirling up into the air, pieces and parts of it flying like chaff in the

wind! Dust and sand and clods of earth geysered up from the road, enveloping the terrible sight. But not until Long Sam Littlejohn had seen the stage guard and driver tossing about in the air like paper dolls, caught up by a devilish wind.

The sound came up the wooded slope to where Littlejohn sat his ugly old roan horse. It was the roaring, terrifying sound of dynamite. There had been an awful charge of it, and now the echoes of its exploding went through the bright, Texas

sunlight like evil thunder.

"The Blaster!" Long Sam Littlejohn croaked. "That dirty, murderin' hellion!"

He hopped off the ugly old roan horse he called Sleeper, every nerve in his gaunt tall body shaking from the thing he had just witnessed. He snaked a Winchester rifle from a saddle scabbard, smoke colored eyes watching the cloud of dust and sand settle slowly along the canyon below him.

He could hear the almost human screams of crippled and terrified horses, and noted that his hands were shaking as he levered a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber. He left the gun cocked, flattened his tall length along the ground, and laid the rifle barrel over a mossy stone.

Three of the six horses that had been pulling the stage lunged out of the settling cloud of dust and stampeded south toward the towering green thickets that stretched from these hills to the Blue Bend of the Rio Grande. They were whinnying in terror and kicking at the ragged remnants of harness that still clung to them as they fled along the stage road.

But the other three horses that had been hooked to the stage would not flee. As the dust settled, Long Sam saw them lying strung along the road, one or them screaming and thrashing in pain, the other two mercifully dead. The guard and driver were there in the road, too, sprawled and limp, unquestionably dead.

"Come on, Blaster!" Long Sam said to himself. "Sneak out of wherever you're hidin', and start searchin' that rubble for the strong box you want."

From boots to flat-crowned Stetson, Long Sam Littlejohn was dressed in jet black. Even the matched six-shooters that were thonged to his long thighs were nestled in black holsters, and had black grips. He lay moveless, knowing that he would be hard to see here in the shadows of

the giant, moss-hung oaks he had halted beneath.

THIS was the fifth time within six months that a stage coach along this road that stretched from Pickett, far to the north in the rich hills country, down here to the Blue Bend terminus, had been blown to smithereens by dynamite. In each case there had been a heavy shipment of money aboard.

The whole Southwest was aroused over the crimes, and the mysterious bandit who set those awful death traps had been nicknamed the 'Blaster', for very obvious reasons. That these unspeakable crimes were the work of a lone bandit there was little doubt, for in each case there had been the boot-prints of a single man found in the smoothly settled sand and dust around the blast-torn coaches.

Long Sam was remembering that, when suddenly every nerve in him tightened. He strained his eyes to watch a faint movement at the edge of a thicket a good hundred yards up-canyon from the wrecked stage. A man stepped into view at the thicket's edge, a tall man who wore a long black slicker and had a dirty-white flour sack pulled down over his head.

There were eyelets cut in the sack, and the hooded head moved jerkily as the man looked up and down the canyon. Then he was running down the road toward the wrecked stage, and Long Sam Littlejohn's gun barrel swung slowly as he watched the murderous bandit.

The Blaster stopped at the road's edge, several yards short of where the twisted stage and the dead guard and driver lay. He bent over, hands making dust fly as he clawed at the dirt. Then he stood erect again working with two thin wires.

"So that's how you do it, you murderin' devil!" Long Sam thought.

He knew what those wires meant, of course. The Blaster simply picked a spot along this Blue Bend-Pickett road, planted a terrible charge of dynamite, then ran two thin wires three or four hundred feet back to some safe overhang or cave, and hooked the wires to a battery box. When the stage came along, the Blaster would wait until it was over his planted dynamite, then send a charge flashing down those wires to a fulminating cap.

The Blaster was taking in his wires now, rapidly forming them into a ball. When the wires were in, the Blaster shoved the ball into a slicker pocket. Then he turned to the wrecked stage. He stopped beside the first sprawled man he reached, prodded him sharply with a foot, went to the next man and repeated the action.

They were dead, as Long Sam had guessed, for the Blaster's hooded head bobbed in approval. He pulled something out of his slicker pocket and began unwrapping what Long Sam judged to be tissue paper from the way it fanned and fluttered in the breeze. The Blaster squatted beside the dead man he had prodded last, reached out, and placed something near the unmoving figure.

Long Sam rubbed his right hand along the side of his black sateen shirt, getting rid of the sweat that had made his palm and trigger finger slippery. The Blaster was on the move again, hopping through the scattered debris of the stage. He dived suddenly toward a clump of weeds, humped over, and began struggling with something heavy. When he straightened up he was hoisting an oblong green box to his right shoulder.

Long Sam Littlejohn began unconsciously humming a range dirge through big, bared teeth as he eased his finger back through the trigger guard and let it curl gently against the rifle trigger.

"Here's a blast for you, Blaster!" the gaunt outlaw said grimly.

When the rifle's angry bark rang through the hills, Long Sam got almost as much of a surprise as did the murderous Blaster. Long Sam was an expert marksman with any kind of gun, and knew when he gently squeezed the trigger that the hooded bandit down there should go heels-over-head, right leg broken half way between knee and ankle.

But nothing of the sort happened. Instead of breaking the Blaster's leg, the slug raised a long plume of dust as it skittered across the road a yard or more ahead of him. The Blaster stopped, rocking drunkenly. Then he was running faster than ever, for the whiplike crack of the rifle had reached his ears.

"What the blue, blazin' heck!" Long Sam growled when his second shot, like the first, went low and to the right.

THAT second slug really started the Blaster larruping, and Long Sam threw a third shot. When it went low and far to the right, as the other two had done, the gaunt Littlejohn knew that something was wrong with that gun. He levered the fourth cartridge into the firing chamber, guessed at the necessary correction, and squeezed the trigger again.

"Hot dog!" he grunted.

The Blaster went down as if he had been foot-roped, skidding on his face, the strong box tumbling out of his grasp.

But the hooded murderer was up instantly, both hands clamped to his right side as he ran staggering to the thicket. Long Sam fired the last cartridge in his rifle, but the Blaster kept going.

"Of all the rotten luck!" Littlejohn growled as he jumped to his feet, remembering that he had no more cartridges for the Winchester.

The thicket the Blaster had dived into reached up the slope to heavy oak timber, such as Long Sam was standing under. He watched angrily while the Blaster flitted from the thicket to the timber lying flat along the neck of a powerful black horse that was running full tilt. Long Sam stared down at his rifle then, swearing in a harsh mutter of sound when he saw that the bead was bent, heeled over to one side.

"It probably bumped a rock or a bush hard enough to bend that sight through the scabbard," he grumbled. "Dad-blame the luck, if that gun had been workin' right—"

He broke off, shoved the rifle into the scabbard, and swung into Sleeper's saddle. His smoky eyes stabbed at the towering green wall of tornillo, pear and mesquite that lay beyond the hills. Out there to the south, maybe a mile away, was a camp of brush hackers, hewing a tunnel through those thorn-armored thickets that would some day be a good road running up-river from Blue Bend. The hackers would have heard that blast, and a roaring explosion such as that had been would tell them that the Blaster had been in action again.

"Come on, Sleeper!" Long Sam grumbled. "If I'm sighted around here, that cussed Joe Fry will be yellin' that I'm the Blaster!"

He sent Sleeper down the slope at a skidding run, smoky eyes grim as he saw how completely the stage had been wrecked. He glanced at the two dead men, shuddered, and was about to ride on when he saw something lying near one body that was as white and flashing as a small, powerful light.

Lying beside the stocky body of a grizzled man who had died in that blast, was a horseshoe-shaped stickpin made of yellow gold and set with a dozen big, brilliant diamonds.

"Charlie French's famous lucky piece!" Long Sam said gravely. "So that's what the

Blaster unwrapped and planted here."

He retrieved the stickpin without dismounting, blinked at it a moment, then shoved it into his pocket. He spun Sleeper, sent the roan up to where the strong box lay. It had broken open, and a heavy sack with a padlocked neck marked "Dalbert Stage and Freight Lines" was spilling out.

"Rattle them big hoofs, Sleeper!" he grunted. "I've got a hunch this diamond stickpin of Charlie French's will tell us who the Blaster is if we use it right!"

Long Sam rode back past the wreckage of the stage, a tense look about his face as he pulled the black-butted six-shooter from the holster at his right thigh. The big Colt roared once, and the crippled horse that had been threshing and whinnying grew as still as its two mates. Long Sam replaced the one spent shell, pushed the gun back into holster, and sent Sleeper out of the valley and into the towering green walls of thorn-armored brush.

But the gaunt outlaw was not following the stage road. He took the winding, narrow trails known to few men, working his way southward toward the Rio Grande. It was slow travel, and the sun had set, bringing dusk's first shadows when he reined in at the edge of the clearing where the town of Blue Bend sprawled along the bank of the Rio.

Blue Bend was a lot like a hornet's nest that had been hit with a rock. Men were buzzing everywhere, shouting in excitement and anger as they gathered saddled horses at the west end of the street.

The Blaster's latest crime had been discovered. Long Sam knew that as he leaned on the saddlehorn and watched from the protection of the heavy mesquite. Dusk was closing in fast, and yellow lamplights dappled the street.

When the thunder of churning hoofs told him that every man who could find a mount was setting out along the stage road,

the gaunt outlaw moved away toward the big hacienda a few hundred yards to his right.

THAT beautiful house was the home of Charlie French, gambler, merchant, and swashbuckling adventurer, according to certain tales that were told. Long Sam grinned a little into the hot Texas night, remembering those tales that were told and re-told of the slim, genteel man's supposedly wild past. Charlie French had hired land cleared, and had built a trading post here on the banks of the Rio Grande twenty-odd years before. Blue Bend was Charlie French's town, lock, stock, and barrel.

Long Sam pulled in at a barn and corral that stood far to the rear of the huge, sprawling house. Inside the corral he heard a man grumbling, and saw a lantern bob jerkily as the man walked to the barn and went inside. The gaunt outlaw dismounted, eased the gate open, and let his roan through. He led his horse to the barn door, grinning as he peered in.

Charlie French was there in a stall, grumbling steadily as he measured grain into a feed box for a leggy colt that kept rooting and nipping at his arms. French was a slender man, immaculate in black frock coat, starched white shirt, gray trousers. His face was lean and well moulded, young looking in contrast with heavy hair that was almost snow-white. His brows were thin and fiat, and as black as the keen eyes beneath them.

"Doin' your own barn chores, Charlie?" Long Sam asked drily.

"Yes, confound it!" French said testily. "My two stable boys lit out with my Morgan saddlers, but forgot to feed this colt. I should fire the rascally pair for such—Littlejohn!"

Charlie French's voice had ended in a sharp cry of surprise. Long Sam had led his

horse inside, and was standing in the lantern's glow, studying the gray-haired, young-old gambler soberly.

"Sam, you idiot!" French groaned. "This town is wild howling for the blood of the Blaster. The devil blew up another coach this afternoon. If you're seen in Blue Bend, my bounty-plastered amigo, you will be shot on sight!"

"I'm not bein' accused of blowin' them stages up, am I?" Long Sam asked drily.

"Of course not," French retorted. "That is, you have not been positively named as the Blaster."

"How do you mean that, Charlie?" the outlaw asked quickly.

"Joe Fry has been in town for the past week!" Charlie French said urgently. "Fry has not exactly accused you of being the Blaster, but he has said enough to let a lot of people know that he suspects you."

Long Sam swore in sudden anger. Joe Fry was a deputy U. S. marshal, working out of Austin. He wore button shoes, store suits and derby hats, and was generally chewing on a cigar. He looked and acted more like a cocky little drummer than the deadly, cold-nerved man hunter he was.

"That sawed-off squirt of a Fry better not start tellin' it around that I'm the murderin' Blaster!" Long Sam burst out.

"The thing for you to do is get on that ugly old roan and swim the river!" Charlie French said sharply. "Joe Fry took every man he could find a mount and went out the west road. Sam! That—that sack on your saddle. It says—"

Charlie French's voice trailed off in a hoarse gulp. His face got pale, and his black eyes widened slowly as he stared at the sack across Long Sam's saddle.

"It says 'Dalbert Stage and Freight Lines' on the side of the strong box," Long Sam said slowly. "I was watchin' when the Blaster blew that stage up this afternoon, Charlie."

He explained fully, watching excitement grow in the eyes of Charlie French. Long Sam slipped his hand in his pocket and pulled out the diamond-studded stickpin the Blaster had left beside one of his victims at the scene of the stage tragedy. He kept the stickpin hidden in his hand.

"You kept that murderous devil from getting the loot off that stage!" Charlie French cried. "And you wounded him. What did he look like? Did you know him, Sam?"

"One of my slugs nicked the Blaster in the right side, judgin' from the way he acted," Long Sam said soberly. "He dropped the strong box, and made his getaway. He had on a slicker and that flour sack hood, as I've told you. He was medium tall, but I couldn't tell anything about his weight or build, because of the slicker. And he got out of there too fast for that slug to have done much more than burn his hide a little."

"But at least we've got something to work on!" French cried. "By asking questions of doctors up and down the river, peace officers may learn the name of some fellow who had to have a bullet wound in his right side taken care of. If— Where did you get that?"

CHARLIE FRENCH'S voice was a thin yelp of excitement as he saw the blazing pin in Long Sam's out-thrust hand. The gambler grinned, reached out, and took it eagerly. But his grin vanished, and the pin fell from his suddenly shaking hands as Long Sam told him where he had got hold of the stickpin.

"The Blaster?" French gulped. "He had this pin of mine, and left it out there beside the body of Stub Deever or Buck Stimpson?"

"The Blaster took this out of his pocket, unrolled tissue paper he had around it, and

put it beside the body of a stocky, grizzled man who had been killed when the stage was blown up," Long Sam said grimly. "The other man who was killed was a lanky, sandy-haired fellow, somewhere around his mid-thirties, I'd judge."

Long Sam bent over, retrieved the diamond pin, and handed it to French, who shuddered a little at the feel of it in his hands.

"Stub Deever was the stocky, grizzled fellow," the gambler said hoarsely. "He was the stagedriver. The lanky red-head was Buck Stimpson, shotgun guard. But why was my stickpin left out there beside Deever's body? It doesn't make sense, that I can see."

"I did a lot of thinkin' about that, on the way to town," Long Sam said soberly. "Charlie, how many people actually know the truth about you?"

"The—the truth about me?" French stammered uneasily.

"You know what I mean!" Long Sam grunted. "When you started a trading post that grew into this town, Charlie, you were an Iowa school teacher, out huntin' adventure. Old Comanche Brock, a broken-down Indian fighter, scout, and trapper, took a likin' to you and told tall tales with you as the gun-slingin' hero. Brock did that to keep the hard-case gents who ride this Border from runnin' over you. But how many people have you ever told the truth about your past?"

"Sam, you're the only man I've ever told anything about my past," French groaned. "And the way you bedevil me at times, makes me wish I had never told you a thing. Brock was such a helpful and lovable old rake that I hadn't the heart to give his tall tales the lie.

"People still whisper about me, say that I'm an ex-outlaw, gun-fighter, smuggler, and heaven only knows what. But you're the only living person, now that Comanche

is dead, who actually knows that I never shot at a human being in my life.”

“I see,” Long Sam said soberly.

He stalled and fed Sleeper, while Charlie French argued almost angrily that the thing for him to do was get to the Mexican side of the Rio Grande as fast as possible.

“Blowout your lantern, and lead the way to the house, Charlie,” Long Sam said gravely. “Sure, headin’ for Mexico while I have the chance would be the smart thing for me to do. But you’re one of the few people I can trust as a friend, and you’re in a tight. I’m not runnin’ out on you, so quit arguin’ and get that lantern put out before somebody sights us with this strong box.”

French blew the lantern out, a startled tone in his voice as he asked what Long Sam meant by saying that he was in a tight.

“The Blaster meant for you to be arrested, charged with his crimes,” Long Sam said bluntly. “Every man, woman and child in this country knows that famous diamond stickpin of yours. The Blaster left it out there, knowin’ whoever saw it would recognize it, and that you would be arrested. What I’d like to know is how the Blaster got hold of that stickpin.”

“So would I like to know how that devil got hold of this stickpin!” French said worriedly.

“How long has it been missin’?” Long Sam asked as they walked rapidly across the corral.

“But the pin hasn’t been missing,” French said sharply. “At least, Sam, I was unaware that it was missing.”

THE gambler moved ahead, swung the corral gate open until Long Sam stepped outside, then closed and fastened the gate again.

“When did you see that pin last?” the gaunt outlaw asked as they moved towards the fine house.

“Last night,” Charlie French replied promptly. “Or, rather, early this morning. I sat in a stud game until daylight. Around three o’clock this morning, I grew so tired and warm I took my coat off and removed my tie, too. I hung my coat over the back of my chair, folded the necktie and stuck it in one of the coat pockets. The stickpin was fastened to the tie.”

“Where was that poker game, and who was in it besides you?” Littlejohn asked quickly.

“The game was at my Border Palace, of course,” French told him. “But neither of the three men with whom I played took that stickpin, Sam.”

“Why are you so sure about the men you played stud with?” the gaunt outlaw wanted to know.

“The men I played with were Stan Dalbert, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull,” Charlie French said quietly.

“Dalbert?” Long Sam probed. “He part of this Dalbert Stage and Freight Company that owns this sack I’m luggin’?”

“Stan Dalbert is the company,” the gambler said firmly.

“How about the other two, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull?” Long Sam probed.

“They work for Stan Dalbert, and have ever since he started his stage and freight line,” French replied. “Certainly Stan Dalbert and his two most trusted men wouldn’t have done it. Whoever took that pin was either the Blaster, or a friend of his.”

“Obviously,” Long Sam said drily. “But who else had a chance to borrow that diamond pin of yores, Charlie?”

“Any of a couple of hundred men could have taken the pin,” French sighed. “Dalbert, Hillard, Tull and I played poker at a table near the back of the main room at my Border Palace. It was a fairly stiff game, and men bunched around us constantly, watching.”

“Oh, fine!” Long Sam groaned. “All we have to do is round up and question a couple of hundred hombres who were millin’ around your table last night. With a little luck, we might get the chore done in six months! By that time— Whoa!”

Long Sam’s voice ended on a low, quick note. He and Charlie French had come to the back wall of the big patio behind the gambler’s house. Looking over the breast-high adobe wall, Long Sam had seen the back door open, and saw three men coming out into the patio.

“Stan Dalbert and his two men, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull,” Charlie French said tensely. “Sam, you mustn’t let them see you here with that sack.”

“They’re comin’ this way,” Long Sam whispered. “I’ll hunker down outside the wall here, and keep quiet. You haven’t seen me, don’t know anything about your stickpin bein’ missin’, or me havin’ this strong box.”

“Don’t worry,” French said softly.

He waited until the three men were within a few paces of him, then scuffed his feet, rattled the patio gate latch, and went inside. Long Sam, hat off and peering cautiously over the top of the patio wall, saw the three men halt abruptly.

“Hello!” French called out. “Who are you fellows?”

“It’s me, French!” a gruff voice replied. “Dick and Ike are with me.”

“Hello, Stan,” French said evenly. “I heard, of course, about the Blaster striking again. I’m mighty sorry.”

“Yeah?” Stan Dalbert’s gruff voice was harsh. “You’re sorry about my stages gettin’ blowed up, and the guards and drivers killed, you say. But if that’s so, why have you been harborin’ the Blaster?”

“What do you mean by such a charge as that, Stan?” Charlie French asked sharply.

“Don’t go gettin’ no notions, Mister Gamblin’ Man!” a thin, cold voice said.

“Make a play for a gun, and you’ll git hurt.”

“What’s the matter with you, Ike Tull?” French asked angrily. “I’m making no move to pull a gun on you fellows.”

“Dick and Ike rode out to where the Blaster got that stage with Joe Fry’s posse,” Stan Dalbert’s voice came angrily. “While Fry and the others was millin’ around, Dick noticed a piece of paper I clutched in the right hand of Stub Deever, the dead stage driver. Stub had lived long enough to write a note on a page of that little tally book he always carried, French.”

“So?” Charlie French droned, and Long Sam could tell that the gambler was tensely on guard.

“I’ve got that note in my pocket, French!” Stan Dalbert rasped. “It says ‘Long Sam Littlejohn is Blaster. I seen him come out of brush and get sack from strong box.’ Dick pushed that note in his pocket without lettin’ Joe Fry or anybody else see it.”

“Why didn’t you give the note to Fry, Dick?” Charlie French asked almost softly.

“I figgered Stan ought to see it first,” a deep-toned voice replied. “The whole town knows that you let Long Sam Littlejohn hang out here at yore place, any time the hellion wants to. So I figgered it was up to Stan to say whether we set Joe Fry onto you or not.”

“Come along to the house, French!” Stan Dalbert said coldly. “We’ll have us another talk about them places I’ve been wantin’ to open here in this town you’re hoggin’. Joe Fry will shore give you trouble if he sees this note. He knows you’ve been lettin’ Littlejohn hang around here, and is already sore at yuh for that. But maybe Fry will never see this note. It all depends on whether or not I get to open them two saloons and the dancehall I’ve been talkin’ to you about.”

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN was softly humming a range dirge, smoky eyes slitted and hard as he watched the four men walk across the patio and enter the back door. And anyone who knew the gaunt outlaw even passably well would have realized that he was fighting mad, for he always hummed that dismal tune when his temper hit the boiling point. He shouldered the sack and let himself through the patio gate, still humming softly as he quartered along the rear wall of the rambling house he knew well.

Long Sam found the window he wanted, swung the hinged screen back, and lowered the sack gently over the sill, letting it down on the thick carpeting of a hallway that ran toward the front of the house. He lifted himself over the sill cautiously, sharp eyes on lighted arches far down the hall on his right. He took up the strong box and went toward the two archways, the softly hummed dirge dying on his lips as he advanced.

Those two archways led into the vast, richly furnished living room, and Long Sam could hear angry voices coming out to him as he halted near the swath of lamplight that spilled into the hallway.

"You're trying to blackmail me, Stan!" Charlie French was saying angrily. "Frankly, I think this whole thing is a hoax. I don't believe Dick Hillard found that note in Stub Deever's hand."

Long Sam took off his hat, peered cautiously around the edge of the plastered archway. Charlie French was well down the room, facing a tall, well-dressed man who had black hair, craggy features that looked red with anger, and hard gray eyes that were cold and alert.

"So you think I'm bluffin', do you?" the tall man mocked.

"I certainly do, Stan!" French snapped. "I think you're trying to frighten me into letting you open up dives and honkytonks

here in Blue Bend—something I've never permitted to operate in this town."

"Have it your way." Stan Dalbert shrugged big shoulders. "I'll turn the note over to Joe Fry."

Long Sam glanced at the other two men who were there in the room. They were standing off to one side, watching and listening as Stan Dalbert and Charlie French talked. One of them was a burly, red-faced fellow, with curly brown hair and sharp blue eyes. The other was lanky, hatchet-faced, and had squinty green eyes that batted constantly. That tough-looking pair would be Dick Hillard and Ike Tull, Long Sam knew, and noted that they each wore two six-shooters in tied-down holsters.

"You haven't seen your pal, Long Sam Littlejohn, anytime today, have yuh, French?" the burly, red-faced man asked.

"Why do you ask that, Hillard?" French shot the question sharply.

Dick Hillard scowled, chewed a thick lip, and glanced a little uneasily at Stan Dalbert, who had sworn sharply.

"Looks like we better go, fellers!" Ike Tull, the bony, green-eyed fellow, said. "Fry and that posse will be gettin' back any time, now. Reckon we'll have to let Fry handle this French cuss."

"Harborin' a criminal is a serious offense," Dick Hillard said. "If Joe Fry gets a look at this note, he'll shore crack down on yuh, French."

"Long Sam Littlejohn is no criminal!" French snapped. "I happen to know that he's not a thief, regardless of what Joe Fry and a few other mistaken peace officers say about him."

"Tell that to Joe Fry! Ike Tull sneered. "Yuh heard Stan's offer. Turn over them three buildin's' he wants for saloons and the dancehall, and we'll forget to mention this note to Joe Fry. Keep on bein' stiff-necked, and—Look out, fellers!"

Ike Tull's voice went up to a screech of alarm. Long Sam Littlejohn had stepped into the living room, hat pulled low over smoky eyes, the sack hung over his right shoulder.

"Littlejohn!" Stan Dalbert and Dick Hillard bawled in the same startled breath.

Ike Tull had a six-shooter in each bony fist, and was blinking like a hail-pelted toad. Stan Dalbert and Dick Hillard pulled guns, too. But, like Ike Tull, they seemed too flabbergasted by Long Sam's calm manner to use the weapons they held.

"Why all the hardware, gents?" the gaunt outlaw asked calmly.

HE PACED down the room until he was within a few feet of the gun muzzles pointing at him, then stopped. He shifted the strong box on his shoulder, but made no effort to put it down.

"Sam, you idiot!" Charlie French groaned. "Why in the name of sense did you come in here?"

"I wanted to see the pretty winged hosses, for one thing," Long Sam droned.

"Winged hosses?" Stan Dalbert growled. "What do you mean by a locoed thing like that, Littlejohn?"

"I was scrooched down outside the patio wall when you and these other two met Charlie outside, a while ago, Dalbert," Long Sam told him with a cold smile. "I heard you claim Hillard and Tull rode out with Joe Fry to where the stage was wrecked, got a note out of the dead driver's hand, and come back here. When you made that statement, Fry and the posse had been gone from town maybe thirty minutes. It's five or six miles out to where that stage was wrecked. No hoss I've even seen could do ten or twelve miles travelin' in thirty minutes. So Tull and Hillard must have winged broncs, and I thought I'd drop in to see the critters."

"Don't get lippy, you meddlin',

sneakin' hellion!" Stan Dalbert growled. "Or had you noticed that you're lookin' into the wrong end of five pistols?"

"I noticed the guns," Long Sam droned. "But I reckon you boys won't cut me down right away."

"What makes you think we won't blast you?" Dalbert snapped.

"You're too buzzin' curious to know whether or not I recognized the Blaster, and who I've told about it, if I did," Long Sam countered.

Stan Dalbert's face tensed, and white patches appeared at the outside corners of his mouth.

"I was out yonder today when that stage was blown up," Long Sam said soberly. "I saw it happen, and saw that sneakin', yellow-bellied coward of a Blaster slip out of the brush, coil up the wires he used to set off the, blast. I watched the Blaster plant Charlie French's famous diamond stickpin beside the dead driver, then gather up this strong box I'm luggin', and start away."

"You'd know the Blaster if yuh seen him again?" Dick Hillard asked slowly.

"He had on a flour sack mask and a slicker," Long Sam said calmly. "So I wouldn't recognize the Blaster, since I couldn't see his face, and couldn't tell too much about his shape and size because of the slicker."

"After accidentally catchin' the Blaster in action, you didn't try to stop him, I reckon?" Stan Dalbert asked gruffly.

"My bein' there wasn't an accident," Long Sam replied. "And I did try to stop the Blaster. The bead on my rifle was bent, or the Blaster would have been Boothill bound. But he dropped this strong box, which I fetched in, aimin' to have Charlie, there, turn it over to its rightful owner."

"What do you mean, your bein' out there wasn't an accident?" Dalbert asked sharply.

“Me and a feller named Bob Walker have ridden guard on every stage that has run between here and Pickett for the past three weeks,” Long Sam said soberly. “We split the ride at the half-way house on Panther Creek, Bob workin’ between there and Pickett, while I work this end of the run. You’ve maybe seen Bob Walker around town now and then. He’s a big, red-headed feller. Bob’s a corporal in the Texas Rangers.”

“Stan, we better do somethin’, and do it quick!” Ike Tull said shrilly. “I know that Bob Walker hellion. If he’s nosin’ around, there’ll be heck to pay.”

“We’ve got us a deal here, Stan!” Dick Hillard rumbled. “Littlejohn fetched that strong box along with him real accommodatin’. Now if him and French was to get shot up bad, and the money outa that box was sorta found scattered around in this room, we could say we caught ‘em dividin’ up the loot and had to use our guns to tame ‘em.”

“Stan, what’s got into you and these two men of yours?” Charlie French cried. “Littlejohn has returned stolen property II to you. Why are you and your two men acting as if you hated him for it?”

Stan Dalbert’s face was white, and there was something in his glittering eyes that suggested fear. He licked his lips, then tried to grin.

“Dick and Ike and me are upset, that’s all,” he said hoarsely. “Gettin’ that note Stub Deever wrote namin’ Littlejohn as the Blaster, made us jumpy, I reckon. But Stub must have been mistaken. Littlejohn fetched the sack in, so I reckon he ain’t the bandit, after all.”

He holstered his gun as he spoke, turning to look at his two companions, who were gaping at him.

“Holster the hardware, boys,” he said smoothly. “With Ranger Bob Walker knowin’ Littlejohn ain’t the Blaster, I

reckon we’re satisfied, eh? And don’t ary one of you fools josh any more about shootin’ Littlejohn and French. They might think you meant fool talk like that. Get them guns in leather!”

THE last sentence was spoken in a tone of stern command. Dick Hillard and Ike Tull turned a little pale, walled their eyes at Long Sam, and reluctantly holstered their weapons. The gaunt outlaw heaved a sigh of relief, put the sack down on the floor, and sleeved sweat off his face.

That had been a close call, and Long Sam’s nerves felt like thin, hot wires, being dragged through his flesh. He began humming a doleful range dirge through big, white teeth, smoky eyes staring coldly at Stan Dalbert.

“Hello, Blaster!” Long Sam’s words crackled harshly through the startled silence his humming had caused.

“Me?” Stan Dalbert howled. “You crane-legged, meddlin’ fool, why would I blow up and rob my own stages?”

Long Sam had no chance to reply. Thinking his attention was wholly on their boss, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull went for their guns, fear twisting their faces. They were on Long Sam’s left, and no doubt considered that an advantage, too, since a right-handed man would have to pull his gun, swing it, and fire across his own body.

But Ike Tull and Dick Hillard were in for a painful surprise. Ambidextrous from childhood, Long Sam Littlejohn could write, throw, rope, shave his face or shoot a gun as handily with one hand as the other. Ike Tull’s guns were out, muzzles tilting up for a deadly, close range shot, when flame and smoke thundered out from Long Sam’s left hip level. Ike Tull fell screaming shrilly, both cheeks ripped open and most of his nose torn away by a .45 slug.

Long Sam was humming again, and suddenly the gun was out of his right

holster, blasting in unison with the pistol in his left hand. Big Dick Hillard sent a brace of slugs into Charlie French's fine rug, but was too dead to know it.

Long Sam started to pivot slightly, and the pivoting motion became a whirling fall that sent him rolling over the floor, pain hammering at his right side in red waves. He saw Stan Dalbert rushing at him, face satanic in rage and murderous elation as he leveled a smoking gun for another shot.

Charlie French sailed into big Stan Dalbert, trying to slap him across the head with a fancy, gold-inlaid six shooter. Stan Dalbert swore savagely, kicked Charlie French in the midriff, then whirled back to face Long Sam again.

But, brief as the interruption had been, Charlie French had distracted Stan Dalbert long enough to give Long Sam a chance to get his bearings. The gaunt outlaw's six-shooters speared flame-tipped thunder up from the floor, and Stan Dalbert's twisted face caught both crushing slugs. Dalbert lurched, lost his footing, and came down hard, the six-shooter spilling from his lifeless hand.

Long Sam got on his feet, shaking from shock and pain as he reloaded hot guns and holstered them. He pulled open his shirt, clucked ruefully at the deep, bleeding gash across his right ribs, then buttoned the shirt again.

CHARLIE FRENCH was getting up, white and sick from the savage blow of Dalbert's boot toe. He staggered over and watched while Long Sam rolled Ike Tull over, wrenched a gun out of the sobbing, bloody-faced tough's right hand.

"Sam, are you sure?" Charlie French panted. "Is it possible that Stan Dalbert is the Blaster, robbing his own stages and murdering men who worked for him?"

"Dalbert was the Blaster," Long Sam said pointedly, nodding toward the lifeless

hulk.

"But why did he do such horrible things?"

"Charlie, when that famous River Road reaches Blue Bend, this town will boom, grow by leaps and bounds," Long Sam said slowly. "You and every other man here will prosper. But Dalbert wouldn't have prospered. The minute that River Road is completed, a big stage and freight company is set to roll down here from Rocky Point. Stan Dalbert's Blue Bend-Pickett line would be finished."

"My heavens, I hadn't thought of that!" French said, startled.

"Stan Dalbert had," Long Sam droned. "That's why he tried to get a toe-hold here with honky-tonks and other sucker traps. When you wouldn't let him have space for his dive, he started figurin' ways to get rid of you. When his stage and freight line folded up, he wanted to be in on the boom with honky-tonks and crooked gamblin' dens that would have made him a fortune in no time."

"That's why he stole my stickpin and left it out there at the wrecked stage today!" French said heavily. "Stan wanted me arrested, gotten out of his way. That is, if he really is—er—was the Blaster."

Long Sam walked over to Stan Dalbert's body, pulled out the shirt tail, and heard Charlie French gasp when they saw a tight bandage over the dead man's right hip. Long Sam jerked the bandage off, exposing a long, shallow gash in the flesh.

"He was the Blaster!" French said unsteadily. "That gash is where your bullet nicked him, this afternoon. But how did you ever come to suspect him, Sam?"

"I suspected that Dalbert, Hillard or Tull, one, got that stickpin of yours, when you told me about that poker game you sat in last night," Long Sam said evenly. "Then Dalbert and his two pals came here lyin' about that note they claimed the

stagedriver wrote before he died. When Dick Hillard wanted to kill you and me, and make it look like we had been dividin' up this loot, I knew I had the Blaster where I could blast him, if I worked it right."

"The insurance company that has had to make up the four other losses on Dalbert's stages has offered a nice reward for the Blaster, Sam," French said. "If we can just convince them that Dalbert was the Blaster, you'll be well paid for the risks you ran bringing him to justice."

LONG SAM winked at Charlie French. "Oh, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull were in on the blastin' of those stages, too," he said. "Dalbert and Hillard are both dead, I see. But Tull is alive. A sawbones can patch him up for a court to hang. Or likely a mob will get him before he ever comes to trial."

"That's a pack of lies!" Ike Tull shrieked. "Dick Hillard and me didn't even know Dalbert was the Blaster until he come in today, cussin' you and hollerin' for us to patch up his side, Littlejohn. Dick and me heard enough to know that Dalbert was the Blaster before he realized he was talkin' too much."

"Baloney!" Long Sam grunted. "You and Dick Hillard were plenty willin' to help murder me and Charlie French, so you two have been in on this stage blastin' business, all along."

"We wasn't neither!" Tull whined. "Me and Dick put the screws on Dalbert after we got wise, this afternoon. We made him take us in as full partners. We aimed to use the money Dalbert got by robbin' them other four stages to open up a saloon here in town, soon as we could get that fool French knocked into line."

"Testimony like that might save your dirty neck from the hangman's noose,"

Long Sam said coldly. "So you better talk when the time comes, Tull, and talk straight."

"Of course I'll talk!" Tull whimpered. "I'll tell all I know, and show the law where all that loot Dalbert got is hid. But get a sawbones before I bleed to death!"

"Sam, where are you going?" Charlie French yelped uneasily as Long Sam moved rapidly toward the archways.

"I hear a lot of whoopin' and hollerin' out in town, Charlie," Sam said. "Fry and his posse are evidently back. The shootin' here was bound to have been heard, and someone will tell Fry about it. I'm gettin' that Sleeper hoss of mine and headin' for the yonder bank of the Rio before that runt of a Joe Fry gets sight of me. Adios, amigo!"

Long Sam vanished into the hallway, the sound of his rapid strides muffled by the thick carpeting as he ran down the hall to the window through which he had climbed earlier.

"J f that Littlejohn hellion is so chummy with Bob Walker, the Texas Ranger, howcome he's so scairt of Joe Fry and other badge polishers?" Ike Tull asked groggily.

"Littlejohn saved Bob Walker's life, a few years ago, and they have been the best of friends ever since," Charlie French said gravely. "Some day, Joe Fry and other officers may realize what a mistake they are making in thinking Long Sam Littlejohn is actually a crook. I sincerely hope it will be that way, anyhow."

"Lie still, Tull, and let's see what I can do about that wound of yours. I want you to live, mostly because I want Joe Fry to know what a fool he made of himself by hinting around that Long Sam might be the Blaster."