

The Rattler Roundup

By LEE BOND



Armed men were crouched
atop the flat cars

*Of all the snakes
in the West, Long Sam
Littlejohn had to go ahead
and bump right into a human one!*

WITHOUT warning "Long Sam" Littlejohn leaped over the lip of the cut, his gaunt figure plunging down through the murky dawn. His boots were aimed at the stocky man who was there in the cut, crouched down to light the pile of brush he had stacked across the shining steel rails.

The crouched man heard the sound of the plummeting figure, jerked his derby-hatted head around sharply. He cried out, tried frantically to roll away, pulling at a gun tucked under the tail of his gray coat.

But Long Sam Littlejohn's attack had been too swift. Outlawed, with a sizable reward offered for his dead-or-alive

capture, Littlejohn knew how to move around without drawing attention to his actions. He felt his boots slam the stocky man, heard the gun the derbied gent had pulled go off with a thundering crash. Then Long Sam was tumbling along the cindery grade, bony hands clamped to the black butts of his own six-shooters to keep them from spilling out of holsters.

"Hold it, Fry!" he yelled.

The stocky man was wallowing around on the ground, cursing dazedly as he hunted his gun. His derby hat was gone, jarred off by the jolting he had taken.

"Joe Fry, Deputy U. S. Marshal!" Long Sam droned. "So you're one of the arsonists behind the trouble Pat Casey is havin' on this hundred miles of railroad of his?"

Joe Fry's square-jawed face was white with rage, twisting as if the frayed cigar butt in one corner of his cold-lipped mouth had been dipped in quinine. His blazing eyes sought Long Sam, who had stalked up and was standing above him.

"You crane-legged imitation of a human bein', you're under arrest!" Fry squalled. "What was the idea in tryin' to stave my back in? You sneakin'—"

"Shut up, Joe!" Long Sam interrupted coldly. "For more years than I like to remember you've hounded me, blamin' me for every low-down crime that's committed here in Texas. You hate me because I'm the only man you ever went after and didn't manage to kill or capture. But seein' you here, gettin' set to wreck one of Pat Casey's trains, makes me wonder, Fry, if you haven't pulled most of the sneakin' crimes your constant harpin' gets me accused of."

Joe Fry spat the ruined cigar stub out of his mouth, got up slowly, and stood brushing cinders from his suit.

"Tryin' to accuse me of attemptin' to wreck a train, are you?" he panted finally.

"I stepped off that Sleeper hoss of mine out on top of the cut yonder, a half hour ago," Long Sam said. "I watched you pile this litter across the rails, Joe. You had a match struck and was ready to touch that stuff off, when I landed on you."

Joe Fry reached down, picked up his derby and sat it on his head. He looked, Long Sam thought, a lot more like a successful business man or drummer than the nery man-hunter he actually was.

"Get busy, Joe!" the gaunt outlaw bit the words out. "Yuh're pullin' this mess apart and throwin' it off the track!"

FRY SNORTED through his button nose, cursed Long Sam roundly, then seized the mound of brush and began pulling it off the tracks. Long Sam grinned faintly, eased down to where Fry's six-shooter lay behind a steel rail out of the badge-man's sight, and picked the gun up.

"If I had my hands on that gun, you noose-dodger, you'd sing a different tune!" the deputy flung the words out hotly.

"Shut up, and get to pitchin' brush!" Long Sam grunted. "I hear the train comin'. I want to see what's under that brush, Joe."

"There ain't anything in this mess of junk that'd wreck a train, and you know it!" Fry howled. "I heard that you were in Buckhorn last night, up yonder where this road Pat Casey stole joins the main line. I got a tip that you'd be on this southbound log train this mornin'. I aimed to stop that train, snake you off it."

"I haven't been to Buckhorn in six months," Long Sam snapped. "I was down yonder in Big Point last night, where this road of Pat Casey's touches the Valley Limited line run by Wilson Brule and his thugs. Did Brule hire you to wreck this train on Pat Casey's line, Joe?"

Joe Fry got so angry he looked sick.

Long Sam wanted to grin but forced himself to scowl instead. Joe Fry was as honest as they came, and certainly would not stoop to a thing like wrecking a train. Long Sam was not at all surprised when Fry wrathfully flung the last piece of brush off the tracks and stood there glaring triumphantly over the fact that there was no dangerous obstruction of any kind on the rails.

"Now, Littlejohn, are you satisfied?" the deputy panted. "Are you willin' to admit that I wasn't aimin' to do nothin' but stop that log train?"

"You'd have had plenty of time to roll a half dozen big boulders down here to the rails before the train showed up," Long Sam droned. "Hike to the south end of the cut, yonder, before that train gets here. Because of such tricks as you tried here, Pat Casey has armed guards on all his trains. They'll blast us if they catch us in this cut!"

Joe Fry blinked a couple of times, then trotted down to the south end of the cut, Long Sam at his heels. The gaunt outlaw ordered him to turn left into timber along a slope. They were barely out of sight when the whistle on the approaching train began screaming, and as it swept past Long Sam and the deputy both saw heavily armed men crouched atop the massive logs that were boomed to flat cars.

"They'd have shot the liver out of me!" Joe Fry said hoarsely as the train roared past.

"The engineer and the fireman saw that brush and knew somethin' was wrong," Long Sam grunted. "The screamin' whistle alerted the guards. They saw the brush there in the cut, too. So did the conductor and that brakie I saw on the tail end of the caboose."

"What are you gettin' at, you slabsided hellion?" Joe Fry glared.

Long Sam grinned widely now. "What

I'm gettin' at is that you're under arrest, and that all the fellers on that train will turn up as witnesses at yore trial!"

"Arrest?" Fry squalled.

"Take a look at this, Joe," Long Sam chuckled.

"A badge!" Fry sounded as if he were strangling as he stared at the small gold-and-silver shield.

"That's right, Joe," Long Sam said, pocketing the emblem. "I signed on with Pat Casey last night. Pat says I'm a special agent, or detective. Maybe he'll raise my pay, right sudden, when I waltz in the he-coon of the arsonists who have been tryin' to make him knuckle under and sell his little road to the dirty-dealin' Valley Limited outfit that's run by your bosom friend, Wilson Brule!"

"You listen to reason!" Joe Fry gulped. "Sure, me and Wilson Brule are acquainted. I've knowed Brule ever since—"

FRY BROKE off, scrubbing a hand nervously over his blunt chin. Long Sam prodded him with a gun muzzle, started him up the slope through the timber.

"You've knowed Wilson Brule ever since he was a hood-wearin', back-shootin' thug in the murderous gang that called themselves State Police, after the Civil War was over," Long Sam growled. "Wilson Brule was a lieutenant in that pack of organized terrorists. He stole such a fortune from men he helped murder that he built his Valley Limited railroad up the Rio Grande to Big Point."

"Alright, Littlejohn!" Fry groaned. "I've had experience enough as an officer to know that you've got me in an embarrassin' position."

"I never dreamed that it'd be *me* arrestin' *you!*" Long Sam chuckled.

"You wouldn't dare take me into Big

Point!" Fry snapped. "Sheriff Ott Sheppard would shoot you on sight."

"You'll be surprised about that, I think," Long Sam declared.

Joe Fry was surprised when, little more than an hour later, Long Sam Littlejohn herded him boldly down the middle of Big Point's crowded street to the stone building that served as combination county jail and sheriff's office.

"This crowd!" Fry gritted as he dismounted.

"I don't like the crowd around here, either," Long Sam droned. "But I hear Pat Casey is in the sheriff's office, and I've a hunch he's here to tell about that brush his train crew and guards seen. Let's go in and clarify things for 'em, Joe."

"I don't savvy this," Fry groaned. "You, a bounty-plastered outlaw struttin' around with a badge and arrestin' decent people!"

"Decent people don't wreck trains, Joe," Long Sam grunted.

Men were banked before the sheriff's office, craning their necks, trying to look through the doors and windows.

"Let my prisoner through, boys!" Long Sam sang out, and Fry cursed him as men whirled, goggling.

The crowd split apart, men spreading back so hastily they stumbled against each other. Long Sam looked up into the startled eyes of rawboned Ott Sheppard, the Big Point sheriff. Behind Sheppard, his round, seamed face mirroring complete astonishment, was little Pat Casey.

"Howdy, Pat!" Long Sam grinned at Casey. "Over here reportin' what your train crew and guards seen out in the cut just above Bull Crick?"

"The crew and guards said there was considerable dry brush in that cut, Sam, and figured somebody planned on another of my trains gettin' wrecked," Pat Casey gulped. "But, boy, this man you're holdin'

a gun on is Joe Fry, a Deputy U. S. Marshal workin' out of Austin!"

"And the galoot who piled that brush on the tracks," Long Sam grunted. "I caught him startin' to set it on fire."

"But glory to goodness, Sam!" the railroad man gulped. "Fry is an officer of the law!"

"Somethin' is all snazzled up!" the sheriff groaned.

"Ask Joe whether or not I caught him startin' to fire that brush he had piled up in the cut!" Long Sam grunted.

"Alright, there's somethin' to what Littlejohn says!" Fry burst out. "But you, Ott Sheppard, and you, Pat Casey, listen to me! I'll have your hides on the fence if you make—"

"Not so fast!" Pat Casey cut in. "Do you admit that you piled brush in that Bull Creek cut, and that Sam Littlejohn caught you in the act of puttin' fire to it?"

"Confound you, I only wanted to stop the train!" Fry yowled. "I got a tip that Littlejohn was up in Buckhorn last night, and that he would ride that log train down this mornin'."

"Joe is also a pal of Wilson Brule's, Pat!" Long Sam droned.

"Oh, he, is, is he?" the white-haired little Irishman almost screeched the words.

"Now wait, gents," Sheriff Ott Sheppard put in hastily.

"Wait, nothin'!" Long Sam grunted. "Jail Fry."

OTT SHEPPARD'S deep-set black eyes rolled uneasily and a flush crept over his craggy face. He shook his head, looking from Joe Fry to Pat Casey.

"Since when, Casey, did you start hirin' professional thieves and killers like this Littlejohn noose-dodger?" Joe Fry piped up. "And howcome you're standin' around suckin' your thumb, Sheppard, when you ought to be pumpin' slugs into

this bounty-plastered Littlejohn hellion? If I have to get tough about his—”

“Alright, Fry!” Ott Sheppard cut in grimly. “You’ve been hangin’ around town here for over a week now, shootin’ off your mouth about me bein’ too thickheaded to stop the trouble between Mr. Casey and that Wilson Brule buzzard. I’ve seen you hangin’ around Ned Witcher’s Planters’ Palace, chinnin’ with Witcher and them two gun-hung men of his, Bull Packard and Cal Zigler. Ned Witcher and his bunch are in Wilson Brule’s hire, even if I can’t prove they are. Come on, Fry, and try one of my cells for size!”

Joe Fry’s face got white with rage. But he finally nodded to indicate that he would submit to being jailed, then turned and put his raging eyes on Long Sam.

“I’ll remember this, you animated beanpole!” he said thickly.

“You’ll be busy enough thinkin’ of other matters before my lawyers are through with you, Fry!” Pat Casey snapped. “I’ve had two of my special agents workin’ some time, now, to see how many men around here are hooked up with Wilson Brule. It happens, Mr. Fry, that my men have definitely established the fact that Ned Witcher and his men go into a secret huddle with Wilson Brule every time Brule comes up here from his headquarters at Sinking Ford.”

“Yeah, and that Brule cuss is in town now,” the big sheriff scowled. “Come on, Fry. Soon as I get you locked up, I’ll take a pasear around to that Planters’ Palace dive of Ned Witcher’s. Maybe I can corner Witcher and Wilson Brule and bounce a few questions off the tricky sons!”

“Joe, who gave you the phony tip that I was in Buckhorn and aimin’ to ride that trainload of logs down this mornin’?” Long Sam asked.

“I’ve got nothin’ to say to you now,

Littlejohn!” the deputy marshal rasped.

Fry stomped away, the big sheriff following him, scowling uneasily. The sheriff returned to his office very quickly, sleeving sweat off his face.

“For a rookie detective, Littlejohn, you don’t mind fetchin’ in a live tiger!” Pat Casey said tensely.

“And look what a picklement I’m in by talkin’ Pat into hirin’ you, Sam!” the sheriff groaned.

“Simmer down, both of you!” Long Sam snorted. “Here, take Fry’s gun, Ott. Just keep your lips stiff around Fry, and don’t let the little cuss scare you. I think he will be glad to forget this whole thing by the time we turn him loose.”

“Turn him loose?” Pat Casey asked sharply. “Littlejohn, you didn’t walk Fry in here on trumped-up charges, just to keep him off your neck, did you?”

“Joe didn’t aim to wreck that train,” Long Sam said evenly. “There wasn’t anything but small brush on the track, which wouldn’t have stopped even a handcar, much less a train load of sawlogs.”

“Then Fry told the truth about only aimin’ to stop the train, hopin’ to nab you?” the sheriff asked hopefully.

“Absolutely,” Long Sam declared. “And he’d have been shot to ribbons by those guards if I hadn’t got him out of there before the train came along.”

“Glory, lad, that’s the truth!” Pat Casey cried.

“Fry would have been killed, sure as thunder,” the sheriff nodded.

“Hangin’ around Ned Witcher’s fancy Planters’ Palace, Joe got in somebody’s way,” Long Sam droned. “They handed him that phony tip that I was in Buckhorn and would be on the log train this mornin’. Whoever gave Joe that tip must have given him the notion of stoppin’ the train with a fire on the tracks, knowin’ he would be

shot to pieces by the armed guards.”

“Sam, I’ll bet you’ve got the right slant!” the sheriff said excitedly. “I’ll hustle back there and try to make Fry see what kind of a shenanigan was pulled on him.”

Pat Casey nodded his white head. “I’ll help you talk sense into him, Ott. But you better wait out here, Sam.”

WHEN the two men had gone, Long Sam slipped out to the now-deserted street. He saw faces peering cautiously from doorways and dusty windows. The gaunt outlaw’s eyes traveled down and across the street to Ned Witcher’s Planters’ Palace, and suddenly a grim smile touched his lips.

Ned Witcher was standing there in front of his ornate honkytonk—a short, fat man with a cigar stuck in one corner of his thick-lipped mouth.

Leaning against the building front beside Witcher was Bull Packard, a burly, thick-necked man wearing two guns low on his massive thighs.

Cal Zigler was there too, standing in the Planters’ Palace doorway. Because of the shadows, Long Sam almost overlooked the tall, big-shouldered gunman. But he saw him now, and could faintly discern the white blotches that were the ivory grips on Zigler’s low-slung six-shooters.

“Somebody in this crowd that was banked around here run and told Witcher that I had fetched Fry in,” Long Sam mused. “People quittin’ the street, the way they have, may mean they think Ned Witcher and them two killers of his are set for war.”

Witcher said something to Bull Packard, who then followed his short, fat boss into the doorway of the establishment. Long Sam sauntered across the dusty street. He turned east towards the front of the Planters’ Palace. He swung to

a halt before a jewelry store window, apparently attracted by the display within.

But from beneath the brim of his hat, Long Sam was again watching the Planters’ Palace. He could see the shadowy outline of Ned Witcher’s face over the cutaway doors and knew that Witcher was watching him.

Long Sam pushed his hat back, scratched his head and glanced toward the door to the jewelry store, as if having trouble in making up his mind. Then he gave his shoulders a shrug, stepped to the door and went in.

And to the open-mouthed amazement of the young clerk within, Long Sam was out the back door as fast, comparatively, as he had come in the front door slow. Dodging rubbish piles and discarded packing cases, Long Sam got to the Planters’ Palace without sighting anyone. He tried the back door, it opened, and the gaunt outlaw let himself into a room that was cluttered with cases of bottled goods, beer barrels, discarded furniture.

“Ought to be another door up here somewhere,” Long Sam grumbled, feeling his way cautiously along a rough plank wall.

A board squeaked so close to Long Sam he recoiled in mingling alarm and astonishment. He heard faint thudding sounds then, and realized he had groped in beneath the stairs that led from the barroom and dance hall up to the private gambling rooms on the second floor. Ned Witcher’s office was also up on the second floor, and Long Sam had a hunch that the dive owner was heading for that retreat.

Long Sam struck a match, and a few moments later found the door he sought. He turned the doorknob and looked out into a narrow runway that led behind the long mahogany bar.

A beetle-browed bartender was at the forward end of the bar, facing the street

doors. A double-barreled scattergun was leaning against the inside of the bar near his knees. There was no one else in sight, and Long Sam ghosted in behind the bar. He slid a gun out of a holster and slanted the six-shooter up at the barman.

"Don't touch the scattergun!" Long Sam's voice was a rasping whisper.

The barkeep jumped violently, flung his head around as he saw Long Sam's twisted grin and leveled gun.

"Well, well," Long Sam droned. "Moss Burton, sure as sin! Last account I had of you, you were makin' a livin' by bushwhackin' men who happened to have bounties on their hides."

Moss Burton grunted. "But I don't pack a badge no more, so yuh've got nothin' to worry about."

"You never packed a badge," Long Sam grunted. "Where's Ned Witcher and his two shadows?"

"Listen, Sam, I've been on duty since midnight, and I don't know where they are," Moss Burton growled.

"You're still a liar by choice, and a back-shootin' murderer at heart!" Long Sam said coldly. "Ned Witcher, and likely enough Bull Packard and Cal Zigler, are upstairs! Witcher left you to blast me with that scattergun in case I started through the front door."

A buzzer whirred sharply, three long bursts.

"That's the boss, wantin' me to fetch drinks up to the office!" Moss Burton gulped. "If I don't show up with the stuff, him or one of the others will—"

He broke off, pale eyes rolling uneasily behind swollen lids.

"Witcher and his two pet killers ain't here, remember?" Long Sam taunted. "But don't argue any more, Moss. Slide past me and head for the stock room."

Moss Burton slogged forward. He stomped on past as if he meant, to do as he

had been told, but Long Sam was not taken unawares when one of Burton's big feet suddenly lashed backwards in a savage drive and he opened his mouth to roar a warning to the men upstairs.

Long Sam's six-shooter bounced off his bristly head. The one-time bounty collector flopped down on his face, breath gusting from his sagging lips, senseless.

Long Sam holstered his six-shooter, picked up the shotgun at the far end of the bar. The buzzer cut loose again, and suddenly Long Sam was hurrying out from behind the bar and across the room. He took the stairs three at a time and was making the last leap to the upstairs hallway when a bullet hit him across the ribs, spinning him half around.

"Littlejohn got in here somehow, Boss!" Cal Zigler was yowling.

ZIGLER'S gun was popping again, and as Long Sam lost his balance and fell he saw the big-shouldered killer crouching before an open doorway. A slug from Zigler's pistol ripped the hat off Long Sam's head, and a second burned the tip of his right shoulder.

Then the scattergun in the gaunt outlaw's hands let loose and Cal Zigler was crashing backwards into the doorway.

Long Sam plunged to his feet, teeth set against the pain of the wound in his right side. He heard wild yells coming from the open room, which he now recognized as Ned Witcher's office. A gun went off in there, and Long Sam hunched down low, hurtling the buckshot-riddled body of Cal Zigler.

But even as Long Sam sprang into the room, a bullet slammed against the shotgun in his hands, slapping the weapon out of his grip. He folded at the knees and hit the floor, whipped his six-shooters from holsters and began firing.

Bull Packard was charging behind a

pair of spitting guns, cursing hoarsely. The big man quit cursing suddenly and his mouth sagged open, spilling a cascade of blood over his chin and shirt front as he sank slowly down to the floor.

Long Sam's slitted eyes swung, for a gun was still spitting at him from a far corner of the room. A bullet slapped across his left cheek. He saw Ned Witcher wedged in behind a huge iron safe, and to Witcher's right, squatting behind a thick bookcase, was Wilson Brule, owner of the Valley Limited railroad.

Wilson Brule's thin, sallow-skinned face was smeared with blood, and he was daubing at it with a handkerchief.

Long Sam felt a bullet skim across the top of his head and ducked so violently he bumped his nose on the soft rug. He jerked his head up and caught Ned Witcher hopping out from behind the safe, beginning to grin in triumph.

Long Sam fired two rapid shots, one from each gun. Ned Witcher's mouth flew open, and suddenly he was pitching down to the floor, blood spilling from two bullet holes fairly between his pale eyes.

"Alright, Brule!" Long Sam called hoarsely. "This is once you're caught in the open. Waltz out, and let's head for jail!"

"A buckshot cut my forehead wide open, Littlejohn," Wilson Brule said calmly. "But this is no fight of mine. I only dropped in for a visit with Witcher, and was caught in the fracas."

"You're also caught by the seat of your fancy pants, with a charge of hirin' arsonists to strike at Pat Casey's railroad!" Long Sam droned.

"You talk like an idiot!" Brule snorted. "Why should I want anyone to bother Pat Casey's two-bit road?"

"Because that hundred miles of railroad old Pat built is everything but a penny-ante, two-bit layout!" Long Sam

snorted. "You held a franchise, but figured a hundred miles of rails connectin' your Valley Limited with the big line to the north would never payoff. You sold old Pat the franchise, and had everybody laughin' at him thinkin' he was a fool to lay steel out across those hills and valleys. But Pat laid the rails—coal minin', lumberin', stock raisin' and farmin' sprung up along his road—and now you want it back."

Wilson Brule walked out into the room, blue eyes coldly mocking as he mopped blood from a deep gash across his narrow forehead. Looking at him, seeing the man's complete confidence, Long Sam wondered bitterly if this shrewd devil would be able to wiggle free to go on plotting old Pat Casey's downfall.

"Funny thing is, Brule—I only came up here to have a talk with Ned Witcher," Long Sam droned. "I think Witcher sent Joe Fry out to pull a stunt that was supposed to be the death of Fry and a heap of trouble for Pat Casey. You dreamed up that stunt of havin' Joe Fry try to flag one of Casey's trains, knowin' the guards would kill Fry. I was hopin' Ned Witcher would admit that."

"Ask Ned," Wilson Brule laughed thinly, jerking his heads towards Witcher's dead hulk. "Or ask Bull Packard and Cal Zigler," and he pointed toward the two bodies.

"Sure, Ned Witcher and his two thugs are dead, Brule," Long Sam shrugged. "But I wouldn't crow too soon, if I was you."

LONG SAM heard boots coming up the steps and moved away from the door, smoky eyes watching Wilson Brule stiffen. Then Sheriff Ott Sheppard and Pat Casey were coming into the room, shoving Moss Burton ahead of them.

"Sam, you're lookin' like a stuck pig!"

Pat Casey shrilled. "But you've shot the daylights out of Witcher and his two killers, that's certain. And look what you've got for Ott's jail, now!"

Pat Casey's eyes were on Wilson Brule, who smiled thinly and held the handkerchief to his cut forehead.

"Neat move, Pat, getting this Littlejohn gunhawk on your payroll," Brule chuckled. "But if you want the pants sued off you, let him jail me as the fool is threatenin' to do!"

"We found this one stumblin' around in the barroom, Sam, cussin' because he had lost his scattergun," Sheriff Ott Sheppard said, showing Moss Burton forward. "Want him?"

"I'll say we want him!" Long Sam grinned. "Moss Burton is a professional killer. Posin' as a bartender was pretty smooth, but it won't keep his neck out of a noose. He's workin' for Wilson Brule, not Ned Witcher. Provin' that Moss led the gangs that have wrecked four of Pat Casey's trains won't be too much of a chore."

"You're batty!" Moss Burton glared at Long Sam. "I've worked the night shift here at the Planters' Palace for the past year!"

"Yeah, you worked the night shift here," Long Sam nodded. "But each time a train has been wrecked on Pat's line, it just happened to be on yore night off! What Wilson Brule didn't tell you and Ned Witcher is that two of Pat Casey's best special agents have been checking and double-checking on the whole bunch of you here who were doing Brule's dirty work!"

"Boss, yuh knowed some of Casey's railroad snoops was watchin' me and the others and didn't warn us?" Moss Burton questioned Wilson Brule.

"So he admits he's workin' for Wilson Brule!" Long Sam said quickly. "He'll

wish he hadn't been! Brule will toss him to the hangman in order to save his own neck."

"Not me, feller!" Moss Burton said. "Some of Pat Casey's railroad bulls have been checkin', or you wouldn't know that nothin' happened to Casey's trains only on the nights I was off duty. Maybe Brule didn't tip me off—"

Brule, a raging oath on his lips, flipped out a gun, pumped three slugs into Moss Burton's body before Long Sam could slap the raging man down with a gun barrel. Long Sam whacked him again, then wrenched the gun out of his fingers, slammed him down in a chair at the end of the shiny desk.

"He killed Moss Burton deader'n a cracked bedbug, Sam!" big Ott Sheppard wailed. "Why didn't you shoot him before he could do that? Now we ain't got a chance of pinnin' anything on Brule."

"Nothin' except cold-blooded murder, since Moss Burton was not only disarmed but in our custody!" Long Sam said gravely. "You see, Ott, I remembered somethin' about this Brule hellion. Seems that the hooded murderers he bossed when him and his kind rode after the Civil War as State Police here in Texas, all feared Brule for one thing—his uncontrollable temper. I figured if I made Moss Burton blunder, that temper of Brule's would let go. But I didn't aim for him to kill Burton."

Long Sam looked down at Wilson Brule, who was white and tense, shocked out of his fit of temper by the shadow of the noose.

"Let's go, Brule," Long Sam said calmly. "I only signed on with Pat Casey last night, and sure didn't figure on workin' myself out of a job this fast. But looks like I have, for with you jailed on a murder charge I reckon Pat won't need me any longer."

“Take your prisoner on to jail, Ott!” Pat Casey snapped at the big sheriff. “And Littlejohn, you need a doctor up here before you do any walkin’ around.”

Ott Sheppard pulled out a pair of handcuffs, linked Brule’s wrists and took the stiff-faced prisoner out of the office, shooting a puzzled glance at Pat Casey as he left.

“Now, about this business of you quittin’ me, Littlejohn!” Pat Casey gritted. “There’s just nothin’ doin’! Only, we’ll let Joe Fry think you turned in your badge and left, otherwise the little bulldog will be botherin’ you plenty.”

“I’ll think it over, Pat,” Long Sam grinned. “Did Fry tell you and Ott anything?”

“Fry is too mad to make any sense, but did admit that Ned Witcher told him you

were up in Buckhorn yesterday, aimin’ to ride that trainload of logs down this mornin’,” Pat Casey grinned. “I told Fry I’d leave it up to you whether we brought charges against him for attemptin’ to build a fire on the tracks!”

“Good!” Long Sam chuckled. “Fry knew better than to pull a fool stunt like that, so we’ll let him stew in his own juices until I’m patched up, and ready to swim that Sleeper hoss of mine to the yonder shore of the Rio Grande.”

“But you can’t quit me, Sam!” Pat Casey howled.

“I’ll think it over, Pat,” Long Sam sighed. “If I decide to keep on wearin’ one of your special agent badges, I’ll let you know before I head for Mexico.”