

by **LEE BOND**

Littlejohn faces a choice between Comanche torture or—hanging!

Long Sam's manacled hands seized his two black-budded six-shooters



LONG SAM'S HANGNOOSE SWAP

IT WAS his big, splay-footed roan gelding, Sleeper, that warned Long Sam Littlejohn of the danger. Long Sam had been hipped around in the saddle, smoke-colored eyes watching the cedar slope up which he was riding. Outlawed, with a cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, there was nothing strange in Littlejohn's watching his back-trail, even here in this lonely land of cedar brakes that fringed the Texas plains.

Back there somewhere, rode Joe Fry, a

deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin. The gaunt, tall outlaw had been worrying about that, his mind wholly absorbed with scanning the country behind him, when Sleeper suddenly broke stride, snorting.

"Judas!" Long Sam yelled, whirling in the saddle.

Even as he whirled, something hit the upper tip of his left shoulder with such force that he was sent toppling backwards, eyes goggling at the arrow that stuck there.

Sleeper bounded sidewise when a patch of brush dead ahead erupted three coppery savages, who leaped forward with the high, gobbling yells of Comanches, scalping knives flashing as they sprang towards Long Sam.

The Indians were unusually loudmouthed, shouldering and elbowing each other rowdily as they advanced, each trying his straining best to be the one to lift the white man's hair.

"They're full of firewater, sure as thunder!" Long Sam muttered.

His bony hands moved then, reaching for the brace of black-butted six-shooters that were holstered at his thighs. The Indians saw the guns wink in the early morning sunlight, but they yelled all the louder, lunging towards their intended victim with even more speed. Then suddenly they were halted, their sinewy, almost naked bodies jerking and spinning and falling as the black-butted guns in the outlaw's hands began a roaring chant of death.

"Bushwackin' sons of devils!" Long Sam gritted.

The gaunt outlaw sat up, glanced at the blood that was dripping from the shoulder of his black sateen shirt where the arrow stuck through.

"Here goes!" he said huskily.

LONG SAM gripped the arrow behind the tip of his left shoulder, set his teeth hard together, and drew the shaft on through the wound. The earth spun and tilted crazily. The next thing he knew he was stretched out on his back, trying dazedly to convince himself that he was having a nightmare, not actually hearing the gravelly voice of deputy Joe Fry!

But he found it was no pain-induced dream. Fry was there, a stocky, blunt-jawed man who had eyes as cold and gray as honed steel. Fry wore a checkered

brown suit, a brown derby, and a white shirt with a black string tie, and button shoes. He was squatting on his heels, a cocked six-shooter in his right hand. He gripped a frayed-out cigar stub in one corner of his cold-lipped mouth, and was cursing Long Sam angrily as he jabbed the outlaw's ribs.

"Come out of it, you crane-legged imitation of a human bein'!" the deputy was saying harshly.

The gaunt outlaw tried to move, only to discover that he was lying on his own hands and arms. He rolled sluggishly over, a growl of kindling anger bubbling in his lean throat when he learned that his wrists were linked together behind his back with handcuffs.

"What's the matter, Sammy, losin' yore nerve?" Fry laughed jarringly. "You got a nicked shoulder when you tangled with those three Comanches. And you passed out like a pilgrim with his first bullet wound."

Long Sam got awkwardly to his feet, but had to stand with spurred boots planted far apart when dizziness and nausea assailed him. His flat-crowned black hat had fallen back, and he shook his head to toss ropes of yellow hair out of his pain-glazed eyes as he watched Joe Fry.

"There's been Indian trouble up here somewhere, Joe," he said gravely.

"I see the war paint smeared on the ugly mugs of them three you downed." Fry shrugged blocky shoulders.

"Take a look at what's danglin' from the buckskin bands around their waists!" Long Sam said flatly.

"Each of these three devils has two fresh scalps!" the deputy blurted. "And two of the six scalps come from the heads of women!"

"From the heads of white women, at that," Long Sam droned. "These bucks were drunk, Joe."

"What'd you do, catch 'em and smell their breaths before you shot 'em?" Fry countered sarcastically.

Long Sam gritted his teeth to keep back the reply that came to the tip of his tongue.

"Fetch my hoss, Fry, and let's get out of here," the outlaw said gravely.

Fry walked down-slope to a rawboned gray horse, swung up into the saddle, and took a lariat rope from the pommel, building a small noose as he eyed Sleeper. Long Sam saw his own shell-studded belts and holstered guns swinging from Fry's saddle horn, and realized that the deputy had disarmed him before he regained consciousness. He hoped grimly Fry would let the guns and belts remain where they were.

"Joe, look out!" Long Sam bawled suddenly.

"What are you up to now?" Fry snapped.

"Up yonder on the rim!" Long Sam gasped. "I saw an Indian peek over at us, then dodge back."

"Sheep dip!" Fry hooted. "Keep yore big mouth shut, while I go dab a noose on that cussed Sleeper nag of yours!"

BUT suddenly Fry dropped the rope, squawking in alarm as he yanked the six-shooter from beneath the tail of his coat. A half-dozen mounted Comanches had sailed over the rim of the slope, their voices lifted to those gobbling, blood-curdling yells. They were armed with repeating rifles, and began firing promptly, although their running mounts spoiled their attempts to aim.

Long Sam saw Fry begin firing at the Indians. He dropped to the ground, slid his hips and thighs backwards through his own shackled arms. When he jumped to his feet, manacled wrists in front of him now, he saw the Indians streaking away

along the slope, heading for a cedar thicket. Long Sam started running towards Sleeper, but halted on skidding boot heels when a bullet burned lightly across his left side.

"You'd better hold it, smart feller!" Fry said coldly.

"Joe, what's into you?" Long Sam groaned. "Unless we get out of here, those warwhoops will jump us again."

"Got your hands in front of you while I was busy, did you?" Fry rasped. "Well, go ahead and pile onto that nag."

Long Sam swore under his breath, but did not argue. He strode to Sleeper, picked up trailing reins, and mounted easily to the hand-tooled black saddle despite shackled wrists. Joe Fry was right behind him, reloaded pistol leveled.

"Head for the rim, up yonder," Fry ordered.

"Are you locoed?" Long Sam snorted. "If we get out on the plains, them Comanches will be on us in nothin' flat. Our only hope is to head back down these ravines, where there's cover."

"Do what you're told!" Fry barked. "There's a wagon train out yonder on the plains. We're headin' for that."

"How do you know there's a wagon train out there?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"I had quit these brakes and was startin' towards the wagons I had seen when I heard you beefin' these Indians down here!" Fry chuckled drily.

"I can't figure what wagons are doin' down here," Long Sam muttered. "There's sure no trail through this part of the country. Was it a big outfit?"

"Three wagons," Fry grunted. "Shut up, and get movin'."

Long Sam started Sleeper up the cedar slope, a puzzled frown lumping thin yellow brows above his somber eyes. He saw the three big canvas converted Conestogas the moment he topped the

slope, heading west across the plains. After a moment's watching, the gaunt outlaw suddenly sat bolt upright in the saddle, forgetting the dull agony of the wound in his shoulder.

"What in thunderation!" he cried, reining in.

"What's the matter with you?" Fry snapped angrily.

"Take a look at those wagons, Joe," Long Sam droned.

"All I see is three wagons, crawlin' along the prairie!" the deputy snorted. "Get movin', before I bend this gun over your thick head!"

"Four teams hooked to each of those wagons," Long Sam said slowly. "The ground is firm, for there hasn't been a rain in three weeks. But look at the way those horses are layin' into their collars, Joe!"

"I won't tell you to get movin' again!" Fry howled.

Long Sam touched Sleeper with dull rowels, riding slowly towards the four wagons, smoky eyes narrow and alert. Two men rode the swaying seat of the lead wagon, but each of the other two wagons had only a driver.

"Somethin' fishy about that outfit yonder, Joe," the gaunt outlaw said as the deputy ranged up even with him.

"What's fishy about three wagons crossin' these plains?" the deputy grunted.

"Those wagons yonder are overloaded, for one thing," Long Sam replied. "On top of that, there's no cavvy of spare horses, no outriders and the canvas covers are closed tight, meanin' there are no women and kids in the schooners."

"So what?" Fry snorted.

"So you'd better change your mind and keep away from that outfit," the outlaw retorted. "I've got a hunch those four gents don't want company."

"Wagoners are always glad to have company," Fry scoffed. "What makes you

think this bunch would be any different?"

THE outlaw shrugged.

"The way they've quit their wagons and are ridin' out to meet us with Winchesters says they don't want us gettin' too close," Long Sam replied.

"They're all buckskin men," Fry said sharply. "Scouts, takin' three wagonloads of supplies in to some of General Crook's scout patrols, no doubt!"

"Wrong guess, runt!" Long Sam said harshly. "That big walloper in the lead happens to be Vint Muller. The sawed-off galoot directly behind Muller is Lew Castle. The third one back, the tall, skinny one, is Jake Carter. The scrawny hellion bringin' up the rear is Ott Bracken."

"Vint Muller and his three men, hey?" Fry grinned. "Well that bears out my hunch that they were scouts, takin' army supplies in to some isolated patrol."

"Scouts, your eye!" Long Sam growled. "Vint Muller and those three men of his are about the most dangerous pack of renegade trail wolves on the frontier."

"Bull!" Fry grunted. "Vint Muller is a trader, known all over the west."

"Vint Muller is a cold-blooded murderer and thief," Long Sam retorted. "His specialty is locatin' settlements or wagon caravans where there are valuable goods and plenty of livestock, then roundin' up a batch of Comanches or other hostiles, gettin' the warwhoops drunk, and settin' them onto their settlement or caravan. When the Indians get through with their butcherin', Vint Muller and those three men yonder with him move in, pick up everything of value, and hightail."

"Keep your lip buttoned when Muller and his men get here, or I'll pistol-whip you!" Fry growled. "What you're up to, of course, is to start a growl with Muller and his men so's they won't let me keep you with them until we hit civilization."

"Rememberin' those six fresh scalps on the belts of the three dead Comanches, back yonder, would keep my lip buttoned around Muller and his bunch," Long Sam I said grimly.

"What do you mean by that?" Fry asked, eyeing his prisoner sharply.

"Those overloaded wagons, yonder, and half tipsy Comanche bucks sashayin' around here, Joe, could mean but one thing," Long Sam said flatly. "There's been a raid on a caravan out here somewhere. After the Indians got in their licks, Vint Muller and his men showed up, put the most valuable goods from the whole caravan in those three wagons yonder, and are headin' somewhere to hide their loot until the excitement over the raid dies down."

"You sound as if you've been on a straight diet of peyote for a week or more!" the deputy marshal blared. "But remember what I said about keepin' that lip buttoned, Sam!"

"Don't worry about me antagonizin' that bunch any, runt!" Long Sam snorted. "I don't want this yellow top-knot of mine danglin' from the war lance or G-string belly-band of any of Spotted Hand's hair-snatchers."

"Spotted Hand?" Fry echoed, hard eyes boring the gaunt outlaw's sober face.

"Spotted Hand is a big, tough Comanche buck who broke away from the main tribe about a year ago, because some of the older chiefs didn't want to declare open war on all white settlers," Long Sam said quietly. "Spotted Hand has over a hundred young hot-heads following him, and they've pulled off some of the bloodiest raids in frontier history. My hunch is, Joe, that the three warwhoops I shot, and the six you couldn't seem to hit, were some of Spotted Hand's bunch."

"Spotted Hand is the army's headache," Fry admitted.

Long Sam glanced at Vint Muller and the other three renegades, frowning uneasily. They had spread out now, slowed their mounts to an easy trot, and, were advancing with Winchesters leveled.

"You'd better pouch that pistol, Joe," the gaunt outlaw warned. "Muller and his men might misunderstand you ridin' towards 'em with a naked six-shooter in your fist."

"This six-pistol in my hand, and the cuffs on your wrists, ought to make it plain that you're my prisoner."

"You blasted little show-off!" Long Sam retorted. "If my own hide wasn't in danger, I'd wish Muller and his three cutthroats would open up on us. Maybe a few slugs whistlin' around your ears would—Joe, look out!"

LONG SAM'S voice ended on a sharp sound of alarm. Vint Muller and his three men, obviously following prearranged plans, suddenly halted their horses, jumped out of saddles, and leveled rifles across the saddle seats. The four long guns blazed almost simultaneously, and Joe Fry was cursing furiously as he fought his lank gray mount to stop the horse's plunging. Two slugs had plowed the turf less than a yard from the gray's hoofs. Two other slugs had blasted sod close to Sleeper's splayed hoofs, too. But at a low word from Long Sam, the old roan stopped. Long Sam shoved his manacled hands high, palms forward.

"Vint!" he bawled. "You and Ott and Lew and Jake lay off the fireworks!"

The four men crouching behind their horses jerked upright, startled at the sound of their names. But they kept those rifles leveled, and Long Sam saw big Vint Muller's teeth flash white against his bronzed face as he grinned.

"Lew, you and Jake keep your guns on them two, yonder!" Muller's deep voice

boomed out. "We'll prance down there, and see what this is all about. That's Long Sam Littlejohn with the handcuffs on his wrists. If that duded-up thing with the pistol in his hand is a badge-man of some kind, then we've got us a laugh on that Littlejohn hellion, for sure!"

Long Sam glanced sidewise at Joe Fry, who had quieted the skittish gray, and was sitting there with the six-shooter in his fist, turning as red as a turkey gobbler's wattles. Fry was courageous, shrewd, and one of the most successful manhunters in the Southwest. But there was a streak of prideful cockiness in Joe Fry that made him unpopular even among those who appreciated his worth as a peace officer. And that pride was wounded now, Long Sam knew.

"Easy, Joe!" the outlaw said guardedly. "Ignore Muller's remarks, or you'll get us both hurt."

Fry cursed through grinding teeth, almost biting the frayed-out cigar butt in two. But he let it go at that, for the renegades were coming forward.

"Vint, this gent beside me here is Joe Fry, the famous deputy U. S. marshal, from Austin," Long Sam sang out.

"That drummerish lookin' galoot is Joe Fry, the scalp-huntin' depity marshal?" Ott Bracken shrilled, halting in his tracks.

Vint Muller halted, too, his broad, dark face suddenly flattening into a mask of angry uneasiness. Muller's milky blue eyes stared unwinkingly from recesses beneath thick, black brows, and Long Sam felt a chill course along his spine when he saw the big buckskin renegade's hands tighten on the cocked rifle.

"Muller, I don't like the way you and these men of yours are actin'!" Joe Fry bit the words out coldly.

"All Fry wants, Muller, is a little help ridin' herd on me until he can get me to jail," Long Sam said hastily.

"I'll do my own talkin', noose-bait!" Fry snapped furiously at his prisoner.

SAM shrugged, relieved to see that Vint Muller and Ott Bracken had lost most of their uneasiness now, and were whispering.

"I'm Joe Fry, deputy marshal, Muller," Fry said crisply. "I have credentials, if you want to see them."

"Howdy." Muller bobbed his head slightly. "I'll take yore word without lookin' at any credentials, Fry."

"Fair enough, Muller," Fry grinned. "Now let's get on to your wagons, and get rollin'. I've been on this slippery Littlejohn hellion's trail for over a week, straight runnin', and I'm wore out."

"Sorry, Fry!" Vint Muller said bluntly. "I'm the only trader on the frontier who can come down here and work this country without bein' jumped by the Comanches. The reason I'm let alone is because I never have anybody except Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter with me. If I let you or any other stranger ride along with me, the Injuns would get uneasy."

"That's your tough luck!" Fry snapped. "It's a four or five day trip from here to a town where I'll find a jail to stick this Littlejohn hellion in. I don't aim to try guardin' the slippery devil that long without any help, so make up your mind that my prisoner and me will go along with your wagon, Mr. Muller!"

"You stop joshin', Fry, and get on to wherever you want to go with Littlejohn," Muller said flatly. "You're not pokin' along with my outfit, and that's final."

"You and your men have had trouble with Littlejohn in the past?" Fry asked, anger flushing his blunt features.

"None to speak of," Muller said quickly. "About a year ago, he slipped into a trade camp I had established down here, and destroyed a batch of wh—er—trade

goods for me.”

“I dumped four barrels of whiskey and watched the ground drink it up, Joe,” Long Sam chuckled drily. “Vint didn’t like the idea when I told him what I aimed to do, and I had to cripple his right shoulder with a bullet before he’d see things my way. Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter were off some place deliverin’ booze to Spotted Hand and his bunch, or I’d likely have had to bust a few caps at them, too.”

“He’s lyn’, Fry!” Muller said harshly. “I didn’t have no whiskey in my camp.”

“I wouldn’t believe this long-shanked sinner on oath,” Fry grunted. “Anyhow, I savvy why you don’t want him in your camp, seein’ he dealt you trouble. But he’s got to be in your camp a while, for I need somebody to help guard him until I can get him jailed. Vint Muller, Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter, I hereby deputize you four men, and order that you give me the help I need gettin’ this prisoner behind bars!”

The four renegades looked thunderstruck. Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter began cursing, glaring at Fry as if he had handed them the insult supreme. But Muller shut them up, his craggy face pale as he turned burning eyes on Joe Fry, who was grinning slyly now.

“Suppose I tell you that me and my men won’t act as yore deputies, Fry?” Muller croaked hoarsely.

“If you refuse to help me, I’d see to it the government officers took a very keen interest in your activities!” Joe said bluntly.

“Vint, the smartest thing we can do is blast both these meddlin’ sons!” Ott Bracken squalled. “If Fry tags along with us, he’d see what’s in them wagons, sure as—”

The rifle in Bracken’s skinny hands suddenly came up, the barrel of it jabbing towards Joe Fry. The pistol in Fry’s

blocky fist tilted, belched flame and smoke and thunderous sound. Bracken’s Winchester roared, but the scrawny tough was already toppling backwards, blood spurting from a bullet hole in his face.

Joe Fry’s gray mount bawled in terror, smashed sidewise into Sleeper, and both horses almost went down. And in that moment while the two mounts were staggering and fighting to keep their feet, Long Sam’s manacled hands plunged down, seized his two black-butted six-shooters that bobbed in their holsters on belts looped about Fry’s saddle horn. The deputy cursed thickly, chopped at Long Sam with the smoking gun in his fist, then blasted a shot at the gaunt outlaw as the two horses reeled apart.

“Get ‘em both!” Long Sam heard Vint Muller bawl. He flattened out along Sleeper’s scrawny neck, jamming spurs against the roan’s tough hide.

THE bronc grunted hoarsely, sailed forward in a mighty lunge, and hit big Vint Muller full in the chest with one shoulder. Muller’s over-sized moccasins came up where his hat had been. Long Sam saw Sleeper’s wicked head slash sidewise, heard Lew Castle’s hoarse scream as the roan’s teeth closed over his shoulder. Sleeper wrenched savagely, and Lew Castle went tumbling over the grass, still screaming. Long Sam straightened then, shoved the left-hand gun under the waistband of his pants, and picked up Sleeper’s reins, bringing the roan around.

“Judas!” the gaunt outlaw croaked, ducking violently as a bullet whipped the hat off his head.

Sam saw lank Jake Carter step from behind a fog of powder smoke, jack a fresh cartridge into his rifle, and whip the long gun up for another try. The outlaw’s bony face tightened, and the six-shooter in his right hand roared. Carter staggered,

blasted a shot at the sky, then sat down hard, clawing at his skinny middle with hands that turned swiftly red.

But Long Sam had no time to watch Jake Carter just then. Vint Muller was on his feet now, a six-shooter in each fist, and he whirled to face the sound of Long Sam's shot.

"Hold it, Muller!" Long Sam warned. "Lift them guns another inch, and I'll—"

The outlaw's voice was drowned in the roar of Muller's twin guns. Long Sam rocked, almost knocked out of the saddle by a slug that raked across his ribs. Muller whooped hoarsely, lunged out of the powder fog his own guns had made, and started chopping the guns down for another burst. The gaunt outlaw's thumb flipped the hammer of the Colt he held twice, and his smoky eyes watched coldly while Vint Muller took two running steps towards him, then pitch over as if a rope had tripped him, coughing a red spray over the green grass.

"Drop that gun, Castle!" Long Sam roared.

Lew Castle whirled away from Joe Fry, who lay sprawled on the ground. Long Sam jumped Sleeper towards Castle, smoking Colt leveled. And suddenly Castle's sweating, white face began to twist and twist, and he let the six-shooter slide out of his fingers.

Long Sam halted Sleeper, looked down past Lew Castle at Joe Fry, who was moaning groggily. Fry's derby was gone, and the whole top of his sandy-thatched head was wet with blood that welled from a deep gash. Long Sam glanced back at Castle, who was whimpering and backing away from Sleeper.

"Don't let that hoss in reach of me again, Littlejohn!" the chunky tough croaked.

Long Sam snorted at the shaken gunman, slid out of the saddle, and

stepped to Joe Fry's side. He pushed the pistol into his waistband beside its mate, then squatted on his heels and began searching the badly dazed deputy's pockets. Long Sam's head swam from pain and shock, and there was an unnatural pallor on his gaunt cheeks. Yet he grinned as he found the key that would remove the handcuffs from his wrists. Haste made him fumble, but he soon had the handcuffs off, walking towards Castle with them dangling from his left hand.

"Leave me alone, Littlejohn," the man whined. "Can't you see how bad yore hoss tore this left shoulder of mine?"

"What's in those wagons, out yonder?" Long Sam jerked his head towards the three Conestogas.

"Household goods, farmin' tools and the like," Castle groaned.

"Vint Muller and you three hellions who took his orders set Spotted Hand and his bunch on a wagon train some time yesterday, didn't you?" the gaunt outlaw asked harshly.

CASTLE'S yellow eyes shifted away, turned down to study the red spot his own blood was making on the grass.

"Where and when was the raid, you black-hearted son?" Long Sam barked angrily.

"Postoak Crick ford, yesterday mornin'," Castle gulped. "It was a ten wagon caravan, but them fool Injuns destroyed most of the goods by settin' the caravan on fire. Me and Vint and Ott and Jake didn't make the haul we figgered, on account of so much of the stuff burned up. And that was the end of Spotted Hand and most of his bunch, too."

"What do you mean, that was the end of Spotted Hand and his murderin' pack?" Long Sam snapped.

"A bunch of blue-clad cavalry was on patrol, and seen the smoke from them

wagons," Lew Castle panted. "They tied into the Injuns, killed Spotted Hand in the first skirmish, and was still chasin' bunches of his braves at dark, last night."

"How did Vint Muller and you other three hellions get away with those three wagons full of loot with the army there?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"We had them wagons loaded, and was pulled off a mile from the burned wagons, when that yaller-legged Lieutenant Frank Lynn come faunchin' down to see us," Lew Castle grunted. "Vint made out like us fellers had been camped up Postoak Crick above the ford, and that we had seen the smoke and drove down to see what the trouble was. That Yankee officer acted like he didn't believe us, but one of his sojers come runnin' up and said they had the Injuns located, so the lieutenant goes spraddlin' away at a high lope. Nine of Spotted Hand's braves came by our camp at dawn this mornin', and told us what took place. If yuh and that Fry hellion hadn't come chousin' along—

"Hey, what's the idea!" Lew Castle's voice ended on a quavery yell. Long Sam had seized his unwounded right arm, and snapped one link of the handcuffs about the hairy wrist.

"The idea is, Castle, that I'm too chicken hearted to do what I ought to do—which is cut your throat with a dull knife!" the gaunt outlaw rasped. "But come along, you sneakin', whiskey-peddlin' renegade."

Long Sam dragged Lew Castle over to where Joe Fry was still groaning and muttering and trying to get on his feet. The deputy's bloody face twisted as Long Sam approached. He began groping dazedly around the ground, hunting for his gun.

"Relax, runt," Long Sam said wearily. "Your gun is off to the left, a dozen feet away. Here, let me give you somethin'."

Long Sam reached down, took hold of Fry's left wrist, and pulled the deputy to

his feet. Just as Fry got his balance Long Sam snapped the free link of the handcuff about his wrist, then stepped back.

"Adios, runt!" the outlaw chuckled. "You want to hang somebody so sweatin' bad, there's sure a good candidate I've handed you."

"I—I ain't done nothin'!" Lew Castle began. "Fry, this Littlejohn cuss beefed Vint Muller and Jake Carter. I seen him shoot 'em both down, and—"

"Shut up!" Fry snarled at Castle. "I couldn't come out of it enough to get up, get a gun in my fist, and a bead on Littlejohn. But I heard you talkin' to him, tellin' him about the raid up yonder on Postoak Creek, yesterday mornin'. Castle, you're about the lowest specimen of humanity I've ever come across. I'll see that you hang for your crimes, you scurvy hellion!"

"Atta boy, Joe!" Long Sam approved.

"Pipe down, you crane-legged whelp!" Fry glared at him. "Pitch me the key you filched out of my pocket to skin yourself out of these bracelets. I don't aim to ride side-by-side with a thing like this Lew Castle from here to the handiest jail."

"You've got a bad habit of lettin' prisoners escape from you, Joe," Long Sam grinned.

"Give me that key and stop braggin'!" Fry howled. "Then go round up a hoss for me and this noose-bait!"

The gaunt outlaw heeled around, started prowling through the grass, gathering up guns. When he had every weapon accounted for, he lugged them to Sleeper, mounted clumsily, and rode away, with Fry cursing uneasily. Long Sam spilled the guns to the sod a quarter of a mile away, then circled back, gathering up the four saddled horses that had belonged to Vint Muller and his men, as well as Joe Fry's gray. The gaunt outlaw got his belts off Fry's saddle horn,

buckled them on and slid his pistols into soft holsters.

“All right, quit dilly-dallyin’ around, consarn you, and fetch me that handcuff key and a couple of them saddled horses!” Fry yelled at him.

Long Sam got ropes off the saddles of the horses he had rounded up, cut the ropes into lengths, and soon had the five horses on leads. Joe Fry’s voice was lifted in a screech of rage that made the gaunt outlaw chuckle.

“You blasted horse thief!” Fry howled. “What do you think will happen to me and this thing you’ve shackled me to, if you leave us out here?”

“Yonder stands three good Conestogas, with teams to pull ‘em, runt!” Long Sam grinned. “I’m takin’ these saddle ponies and their ridin’ gear with me. But you and Castle can have the wagons.”

“It’ll take me weeks to reach civilization in those blasted wagons, you hellion!” Fry wailed.

“Which suits me just fine, since I’ll have plenty of time to hit back for the thicket country down along the Rio Grande, and let these wounds heal up,” Long Sam laughed. “I sorta made a deal with the hangman, by swappin’ him Lew Castle’s neck in place of my own. If I pick up a few cash dollars boot in the deal off the sale of these ponies and the gear they’re packin’, why should you complain, Joe?”

Long Sam rode away, chuckling despite the misery of his throbbing wounds. Joe Fry was fairly turning the air blue, but Long Sam did not even look back as he jogged towards the cedar thickets on the slopes and along the gullies that lay beyond the edge of the plains.