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# **ACTION STORIES**

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# Last Stand Of A Law Dog

By Walker A. Tompkins

DEATH WAS COMING UP THE Chisholm Trail with Giff Cragg, the marshal of Longhorn, marked as its victim. Ever since the gun battle in Joe Flance's saloon a year ago, old Giff had been expecting Death's messenger, in one guise or another. It was ironic that that courier of doom should arrive on this of all mornings, when Longhorn's city council was meeting in secret session to oust the old star-toter from the office he had held for twenty-odd turbulent years.

Giff Cragg, off duty, was sunning his rheumatic frame on the front porch of the jailhouse when the stranger loped up Post oak Street on a blue roan gelding which bore the Rocking V iron on its hind quarters, and reined in at the jail rack.

The rider was young and sun-blackened and his batwing chaps bore the scuffed marks which hinted that he came from the *brasada* thicket country down on the Nueces. Reading the roan's brand, Cragg guessed vaguely that he was repping for the big Rocking V outfit, which was always among the first spreads to reach Longhorn with a pool herd, Kansas bound; a rider sent in advance of Rocking V beef, probably, to scout grass conditions and the depth of the Red River crossing here between Texas and the Indian Nations.

It was with some surprise that the grizzled old marshal heard the stranger call out his name as he stepped from stirrups.

"You Marshal Cragg, suh?"

Getting the lawman's nod, the rider fished a grimy envelope out of his shirt pocket.

"I been riding the grubline north," the stranger explained. "A rancher down-trail gave me this message to deliver when he heard I would reach Longhorn ahead of him."

Cragg accepted the envelope and muttered his thanks. This letter, he knew instinctively, was the one he had been expecting for almost a year now.

The Rocking V man inquired the way to Joe Flance's place, the Blue Palace Saloon. He left his blue roan at the jail rack and headed down Post oak toward the saloon, leaving Cragg to slit open the envelope.

The letter was crudely penciled, giving no clue as to its author, each work painfully fashioned in capital letters:

MARSHAL CRAGG,  
LONGHORN, TEXAS.

LAST SUMMER YOU LOCKED UP FLANCE'S SALOON AFTER SHOOTING THE SLASH W TRAIL BOSS, JUTT LEEDOM, AND JAILING FOUR-FIVE OF HIS DROVERS. THAT BUSINESS DELAYED SLASH W TEN DAYS AND WHEN THE HERD REACHED DODGE CITY THE BOTTOM HAD DROPPED OUT OF THE BEEF MARKET. AN OUTFIT DON'T FORGIVE A THING LIKE THAT VERY EASY.

SLASH W IS ON THE TRAIL AGAIN. WE FORD THE RED AT LONGHORN SOON AFTER YOU GET THIS LETTER. WHEN SLASH W SEES JUTT LEEDOM'S GRAVE IN YOUR BOOT-HILL, THEY'RE BOUND TO REMEMBER IT WAS YOU WHO PUT HIM SIX FOOT UNDER, MARSHAL.

GIVE SLASH W PLENTY OF ELBOW ROOM WHEN THEY SHOW UP. YOU ORDERED SLASH W TO DRIFT ON THROUGH LONGHORN WITHOUT STOPPING THIS SEASON. SLASH W AIMS TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO BACK UP THAT WAR TALK, CRAGG. BETTER YOU LEAVE TOWN.

The letter was unsigned. But Giff Cragg had no need to ask the Rocking V puncher who had delivered it as to the identity of its writer.

Moss Wetrip was en route north with vengeance in his blood, a feud to settle in gunsmoke. The grapevine had already warned Cragg that the Slash W boss had marked him for a spot in the same boot-hill where Jutt Leedom was buried. The wonder was that Wetrip hadn't showed up before now, on a bushwhack mission . . .

Crumpling the letter in an arthritic fist, Giff Cragg let his rheumy gaze drift across Post oak to the upper story of the Panhandle Saddle Shop, where he knew his own destiny was in the balance. That upstairs room served Longhorn as a sort of city hall, and the City Dads were up

Old Giff Cragg didn't mind age crippling his magic gun, but he sure aimed to turn in a clean badge—bright enough to show a killer's face by gun-flame.

*Whooping and shooting the sky, the Texans thundered into town.*



there holding a pow-wow to which Cragg hadn't been invited.

All winter the ugly rumor had been gaining momentum, that Giff Cragg, at seventy-five, had outlived his usefulness as marshal of Longhorn. In barrooms and over gambling tables, the arguments had seesawed pro and con.

His friends insisted that old Giff's twenty-year record would keep forever bright the star he wore, that his fighting heart was as sound as ever. His enemies—and their number was legion, for Longhorn had the makings of the toughest town on the Chisholm Trail—had a ready answer for that.

Weren't Cragg's eyes playing out on him? Hadn't old age dulled his reflexes, robbing his legendary draw of its one-time speed? Wasn't arthritis crippling his trigger fingers? It took more than guts and brains and a spectacular past to hold a hell-bent trail town in line. Cragg had outlived his time . . .

Cragg had heard those rumors, but he had ignored them. Cruising Postoak Street from noon to midnight, he kept the riff-raff from molesting the respectable citizenry, playing no favorites, wearing no man's collar, siding with no clique or faction in the town. He knew his job and kept his reins taut, and to hell with rumors . . .

But this morning, cooking breakfast in his living quarters in the jail annex, he had seen Mayor Joe Flance and the three members of the town council meet at the alley door which led to the council chambers over the saddle shop. He knew then that events were fast shaping up against him, materializing into something more concrete than mere rumor. Joe Flance was crowding the City Dads into action, giving substance to the slurring innuendos which were being whispered behind hands in the honkies and dead-falls.

**T**HIS was the first meeting Giff Cragg had missed since the trail town had incorporated under the laws of Texas, ten years before. Old Giff was sure Flance had called a secret session of the council when Lucy Paige had shown up, toting the ledger she used for recording the minutes.

Trouble came in bunches. This ultimatum which had come up the Trail from Moss Wetrip—boiled down to its essentials, it was a warning to pull stakes or die. What hurt was the likelihood that Joe Flance would force him to turn in his star before Wetrip's outfit got to the Red. That was what put a sickish sensation in Giff Cragg's belly this morning, not the fact that his career was in jeodardy. After twenty years the old warhorse was being put out to pasture, leaving someone else to fight his battles . . .

Because inaction and suspense could be intolerable things, the old lawman shuffled around back to the shed he had built against the rear wall of the brick jail, where he was building a steam-heat rig that was at once his hobby and his cherished pride.

It got plenty cold in wintertime, when the Texas northers crusted the Red with ice and stacked snowdrifts against Longhorn's shabby buildings. But Giff Cragg had freighted in an old boiler from a wrecked ferryboat down-river, had installed it beside a brick furnace in his jail lean-to. Before cold weather rolled around again he would have the cell block, front office and his private living quarters equipped with steam pipes heated by the boiler.

Threading pipe on the makeshift workbench in the furnace room, Giff Cragg let his mind wander a bit to his personal dilemma. Everything added up against him.

Joe Flance, the present mayor and leading politician, was one of those original carpetbaggers who had bought up holdings in town with the profits of his Union army contracts, buying out stores and saloons and vacant lots from their bankrupt owners. But so far, Joe Flance hadn't been able to oust Longhorn's Texas marshal . . .

Just short of eleven o'clock, suspense got the best of Cragg and he left his pipe-threading chore to return to his front office. He was in time to see the town clerk, Lucy Paige, opening the windows of the council chambers to air them out. Simultaneously he saw Joe Flance and the City Dads slip out of the alley entrance with an obscure conspiratorial air and scatter to their respective places of

business, their conference over.

"Left Lucy to break the news," Cragg muttered. "And I'd welcome it, if it wasn't for this Slash W business crowding me . . ."

He saw Lucy Paige leave the saddle shop's alley door and quarter through the ankle-deep dust of Postoak Street, coming toward the jail. She was slim and curvaceous in her neat gingham dress, the sun catching highlights on her highpiled mass of wheat-colored hair.

Giff Cragg pretended to be engrossed in dismantling his Ballard .57 carbine when Lucy presented herself in the jail doorway. She had the bulky minute-book tucked under her arm, and her usual jaunty greeting and reckless grin were missing this morning.

"Marshal, I—"

"You are the bearer of evil tidings," Cragg cut in. "Come in, honey, and haul up a chair. I been expectin' you."

Lucy Paige remained standing, her soft amber eyes filled with something which struck Cragg as being akin to pity. He didn't want pity from this brawling cowtown he had ramrodded for the best years of his life, come hell or high water. Anything but pity . . .

"Pop—" That was more like it. That was the way Lucy Paige had always addressed him, since her pigtail days. "Pop, the Mayor called a special meeting of the Council this morning. He—he purposely didn't notify you."

Cragg nodded, a gnarled hand seeking the crusty meerschaum in his vest pocket. He started cramming the bowl with shavings from a cut plug which he kept in an old gunpowder can on his desk.

"Pop—they've hired a new marshal," she gave it to him bluntly. "He'll be here next week-end to take over. They—they instructed me to ask you for your resignation, effective when the new marshal shows up. I—I'm sorry, Pop."

If old Cragg was hurt by the news, he gave no sign of it. He was thinking, "Maybe I'll have time to clip Moss Wetrip's horns before I'm kicked out, at that . . ."

Aloud he said to the girl, "Well, now, Lucy—no reason for you to pull such a long face. Longhorn needs a new star-

toter, me being stove up like I am. You'll have my resignation."

"Joe Flance has been after my star since before you was born, Lucy," he reassured her. "The other councilmen have sided me a long time, wanting to keep Longhorn a respectable community. Flance aims to hire a gunhawk, a killer who'll follow orders and open Longhorn to the hoodlum trade . . . to the profit of Flance's deadfalls and honkatonks. He's finally pulled the council his way by convincin' 'em I'm too old to pack a gun or tote a star."

It was a long speech for the tactiturn marshal, but it summed up exactly what had happened at this morning's council meeting. Flance had swung the other board members against Cragg at last.

Knowing what the star meant to old Giff, the girl lost the last vestige of her control and left the doorway to bury her cheek against his rusty vest, as she had once done in her baby days.

"It—it's not fair, Pop," she choked. "You could whip Longhorn into line, and you know it. The council could at least have let you retire with dignity."

Giff Cragg held the girl away from him. There was something he had to know: "Any idea who the new marshal will be, Lucy?"

She nodded, suddenly unable to meet his eyes, but in that confusion Giff Cragg knew he had out-foxed Joe Flance.

"It's Duane Redfern, Pop. The man I'm engaged to marry."

## II

STRANGE LIGHTS KINDLED IN the old man's eyes, and she felt the sudden accelerated pumping of his heart as she clung to him. Duane Redfern was a well-known name in north Texas. Barely out of his teens, he had cleaned up San Antone, later moving to Tascosa where his blazing guns had tamed that lawless trail town.

"I didn't know this, Pop," she went on, "but Duane applied for the job a month ago. The council hired him without my knowledge. Today's meeting was so Joe Flance could draw up a resolution demanding your resignation. You—you don't think I had anything to do—"



For the first time, the old marshal showed her a grin.

"Lucy," he said, chucking her under the chin with paternal familiarity, "I'll let you in on a secret. Ever since you went down to San Antone to school an' met young Redfern an' fell in love with him, I been doing some thinking."

She stared at the old man, not sure she understood him.

"Pop, do you mean——"

"It was me that sent word to Duane Redfern that Longhorn needed a new marshal, honey. He was the logical man for the job. Only I—I didn't think he'd take up my offer so pronto. I'd had hopes of ramrodding Longhorn for this summer, anyway."

She kissed him then, impulsively and with all her girlish adoration in her eyes. And, because she was needed at her father's Trail House hotel and restaurant, she left the jail office before Giff Cragg could summon the courage to let her in on a secret which she must some day know.

Left alone, Cragg did something which was a rare thing for him.

**PULLING** the old-fashioned turnip watch out of his pocket—a time-piece which had been a wedding gift from his bride—Cragg screwed off the back of the silver case and scanned the time-tarnished daguerrotype he had soldered there, long ago, as a sort of lucky talisman.

It portrayed a likeness of himself, as he had appeared on his first wedding anniversary thirty years ago. Seated stiffly on a photographer's stool, a girl's hand was on his shoulder. A fragile beauty, who must have been around Lucy Paige's age when the tintype was taken. In Giff Cragg's arms was a doll-like baby in a long garment of filmy white lace.

Patrice Redfern had been her maiden name. Giff had long since stopped trying to rationalize the right or wrong of what had separated them. Patrice hadn't possessed the moral or physical stamina to cope with the rigorous life which had been the Texas frontier in the years between the Alamo and Fort Sumter.

The romantic buffalo hunter must have looked glamorous to a sensitive young

wife and mother who was eating her heart out in an isolated settlement here on the Red, living under the constant threat of Comanche attack. Giff Cragg hadn't laid eyes on her or the baby since the buckskin man had taken them away while Giff was out hunting antelope for their winter meat supply.

He knew in a vague way that she had returned to San Antonio to live, to raise little Duane to be a gentleman instead of a frontiersman . . .

Cragg screwed the watch case shut and snapped open the front cover to consult the time. Eleven forty-five. Fifteen minutes before his inefficient deputy, Slats McBride, wound up his midnight-to-noon tour of duty and came into the jail office to hang up his gunbelt for another day.

Come twelve noon, Cragg's official day would begin, winding up at midnight. Experience had taught the old lawman that trouble usually broke during the hours between sundown and midnight. That was why he had delegated the quiet second shift to his deputy.

Duane Redfern was due in another two-three days, Lucy had told him. When he arrived, Giff Cragg would have reached trail's end, so far as his life's work was concerned. The knowledge put an empty feeling in the pit of his belly.

Slats McBride came in on the dot of twelve, grunted his usual laconic report of his tour's eventless routine, hung up his guns and departed. Cragg could tell that McBride hadn't heard about what had happened at the secret council meeting.

Buckling on his own gun harness, Cragg left the Longhorn jail and headed upstreet toward Joe Flance's saloon. Passing the intersection where Cinco Street joined Postoak, dividing the town into quarters, Cragg turned his rheumy gaze to the south.

Smudging the clean flat line of the Texas horizon was a feather of red dust, drifting to obscure the copper-rivet disk of the sun. The first herd of the Chisholm Trail's new season was behind that fumerole of dust, flaunting a red banner which warned of impending trouble for the trail towns strung along its path.

Soon there would be dozens of such smudges fouling the skyline, around the

clock and for weeks on end. One day soon, Slash W's pool herd from the San Saba would come across the curvature of that horizon, and bed down on the sage flats beyond the boothill graveyard where Jutt Leedom's grave lay under a year's growth of weeds.

A bullet from Cliff Cragg's .45 had put the Slash W boss six feet under. It mattered not to Slash W that Leedom had murdered a man during a poker game in the Blue Palace. To Moss Wetrip, Leedom's death was classified as unfinished business. . .

With that thought riding him, Cragg pushed through the Blue Palace's batwings and approached the bar. He was conscious of the abrupt hush which congealed the room at his entrance, and knew Joe Flance had been talking about him.

**F**LANCE WAS tending bar now, a rare concession for the carpetbagger boss of Longhorn. He was a chunky-built man of fifty, whose bullet head was topped by a shoebrush pompadour in the Prussian fashion, his front teeth capped with gold, an absurdly large diamond winking in his cravat knot. Trimmings which went with the most affluent citizen on the Trail.

"A word with you, Mayor," the marshal said, ignoring the mocking stares of Flance's floor men at a nearby poker table. "In private."

Joe Flance's gold teeth glinted to accentuate the predatory droop of his lips. At the moment, he was setting a bottle and shot glass in front of the Rocking V rider. Lining the brass rail on the far side of the stranger were a half-dozen drovers whose stubbled faces and dust-grimed clothing branded them as members of a trail crew, riding into town in advance of their north-bound cattle—the herd even now bearing over the skyline, Cragg judged.

"Whatever you got to say to me," Flance grunted, "can be said in front of my customers, marshal."

"Word reached me today that Wetrip's Slash W outfit is due at the Red before long," the marshal said quietly. "I reckon you know what to do when they show up."

The cowhands lining the bar seemed to

have forgotten their drinks. Leaning against the mahogany, they eyed Cragg and the bartender as if sensing the undercurrent of hatred which flowed between these two.

"So, now," Flance drawled, hooking his thumbs in the shoulder straps of his bar apron. "You speak in riddles this morning, Giff. Before you go on, did the Paige girl see you this morning?"

A jeering laugh came from the poker table where Flance's idle house men were gathered. Cragg felt a red tide lift above his collar, and cursed inward at this proof that the mayor's thrust had struck home.

"Lucy delivered the council's walking papers, yeah," Cragg answered. "And I know what that means. You're importing a new marshal who's supposed to turn Longhorn wide open, follow your orders to the letter. That right, Flance?"

Flance's gold-tooth grin widened.

"We need a marshal who won't try to drive business away from town, yeah," admitted the Yankee mayor. "The way you been closing up saloons every time some drover lets off steam, you're giving Longhorn a bad reputation among the men who spend their money here. The new marshal will know what side his bread's buttered on, I reckon."

Cragg decided to let that ride. "Getting back to my riddle talk about the Slash W, your memory ain't that short, Mayor."

"Slash W's patronage is something I anticipate every trail season, marshal," the carpetbagger said unctuously. "They spend their wages in my establishment and for that I am grateful, as any business man should be."

Cragg's mouth compressed. For three seasons straight, the Blue Palace had been the scene of gun fights which were traceable to Slash W's patronage.

"You'll lock up the Palace as soon as Slash W shows up, Mayor. If the new marshal's on duty then and if he thinks otherwise, that's his business. As long as I'm toting this star, the Palace is out of bounds to any and all Wetrip riders."

Joe Flance leaned across the bar, his eyes aglint with an obscure amusement.

"You're a trifle late with your ultimatum this year, Giff. Slash W's advance guard is already here. If you'd read the

brands on the saddle stock lining my rack on Cinco, you'd have known that before you come in. Or did you?"

Cragg's gnarled fingers clamped around his cartridge belt. Following the direction of Flance's quick sideward glance, the marshal had his answer. The five cowhands at the bar this morning were Slash W men.

At Cragg's elbow, the Rocking V man was toying with his whiskey glass, apparently a disinterested onlooker to this scene. Meeting Cragg's eye, the drifter nodded confirmation.

"Slash W's beef is moving into bed-ground tonight, marshal," the stranger said. "They aim to ford the Red tomorrow. First outfit into the Nations this year. I picked up that letter for you only yesterday.

Cragg laid his mineral-hard glance on the five cowhands who lined the bar, waiting for his reaction.

*This is the test Wetrip sent my way, he was thinking. They're waiting to see if I'll back down, drag wagons before Wetrip rides in for a showdown . . .*

Ignoring the Slash W riders, Cragg turned to Flance. "I'll be back in an hour, Mayor. I expect to find a padlock on your door by then."

He turned back to the Slash W drovers and gestured toward the door. "Soon as you've downed your drinks, trail your spurs out of here. Flance's saloon isn't catering to Slash W this year."

The Slash W man nearest to Cragg—the marshal recognized him now as being a breed cavy wrangler named Pancho Beetham—hooked the spike heel of a cowboot on the brass rail and shook his head slowly.

"We're thirsty, marshal. Happens we always patronize the Blue Palace when we hit Longhorn. I reckon we're staying until the rest of our outfit shows up."

Cragg met the taunt in Beetham's narrowed eyes, read the significance of the four drovers behind the breed wrangler as they stepped away from the bar, clearing their gun butts for action. His glance shifted back once more to Joe Flance.

"Like I said, I'll be back in an hour, Mayor," he repeated. "Have a lock on your door."

So speaking, Cragg turned to leave.

Then, even as the Slash W riders went slack and started to swivel back to the bar, Cragg spun on his heels and his twin Colts were out of leather, snapped into the open with all the old-time speed that made Cragg's draw a legend up and down the Trail.

"You said you aimed to stay around, Beetham!" the marshal snapped, his gun muzzles swinging in a V to cover the dismayed drovers. "You will. In my calaboose. You'll stay around until Wetrip's herd is well into the Nations next week."

Caught flat-footed by the old marshal's guns, Pancho Beetham and his four trail mates had no alternative but to lift their arms well away from gun stocks.

Behind the bar, Joe Flance's pink-sleeved arms moved surreptitiously under his counter, to lift a double-barreled shotgun from the shelf there.

Reading that moveemnt through the tail of his eye, Cragg knew the Mayor of Longhorn intended to butcher him with buckshot. There could be no preventing it, with Flance slightly behind him. To swing his guns to meet the bartender's threat would be to expose himself to the lightning draws of the bayed Slash W hands, waiting for this very opportunity.

It was the Rocking V puncher who stepped into the breach. Even as Flance got his sawed-off scattergun above the bar level, he found himself staring into the bore of a long-barreled Peacemaker which the Rocking V rider slid across the mahogany.

"Put the greener back, Mister Mayor!" ordered the stranger. "I'd hate to tally the man who hired me to come up here to wear the marshal's star before I even reported for duty."

### III

**J**OE FLANCE EASED DOWN THE twin hammers of the buckshot gun, returning the weapon to its under-bar shelf with an alacrity which would have been amusing under less strained circumstances.

"You're — Duane Redfern?" Flance cawed incredulously.

Giff Cragg turned to stare at the whippy-built stranger at his elbow, knowing he owed his life to the man's cool interven-



tion. He saw the stranger nod, keeping his Colt resting on the bar.

"I came in here to introduce myself," Redfern said, "but I didn't get the chance. I—"

Pancho Beetham made his play then, knowing Cragg was off guard. His left arm lowered as he half-turned away from the bar and then the splayed fingers of his right hand swept toward his flanks and whipped a gun from holster.

Simultaneously with the gun's whipping upthrust, the breed lunged sideways along the bar to pin down Duane Redfern's gun with the elbow of his left arm. With the stranger momentarily out of the play, Beetham swung his gun toward the marshal. The whole smoothly-coordinated motion had occupied less than a clock-tick of time.

Giff Cragg had the Slash W cavvy wrangler under a cold drop. His brain, as razor-edged as it had ever been, telegraphed its shooting orders to Cragg's trigger finger.

But disease-stiffened sinews failed to respond for a time-lag that could only be measured in hundredths of a second. And during that lag, Beetham squeezed off his shot.

Cragg heard the explosion of the breed's gun, felt its concussion and the sting of burned powder pelting his face. His own Colt thundered then, but at point-blank range his slug raced through space and missed Beetham's broad chest by a margin wide enough to send the bullet slamming into F lance's back-bar mirror.

*Missed!* Cragg heard an accusing voice resound inside his stunned brain. *Missed a target close enough to touch. I've lost my gun savvy, just like F lance has been telling the town . . .*

It seemed to Cragg that time had slowed down to a crawl. Everything that happened was crystal clear in Cragg's eyes, but its tempo had been reduced to an unreal slow-motion, losing the illusion of reality. His senses seemed to be swimming against an invisible pressure, like the drag of a nightmare.

Through his own lifting gunsmoke he saw Beetham cocking his gunhammer for a second try. Out of the tail of his eye he was aware that Duane Redfern was still trying to wrench his gun out from under

the pressure of the halfbreed's elbow, at the same time swinging a spurred boot up toward Beetham's crotch.

The kick landed on the wrangler's groin, doubling him up, causing him to drop the smoking Colt. Beetham was out of the fight, but behind him the four Slash W riders had their guns out of leather.

Cragg, fighting the shackles which burdened his reflexes, swung his own .45s to meet their menace, and then, unaccountably, he discovered that his left arm was a dead weight, that he did not have the strength to raise the burden of the six-gun it held.

The strength left his knees then, and he sagged floorward. But the four Slash W punchers lined before him did not open fire at their kneeling target. They were backing off, arms lifting.

Shaking his head stupidly, Cragg saw Duane Redfern step between him and Beetham's writhing shape. Redfern was stepping from man to man along the bar, stripping Colts from holsters and tossing them into a sandbox cuspidor. As Redfern disarmed the last Slash W rider, Joe F lance rallied out of his daze and snarled out, "You're taking orders from me, Redfern. You're the new marshal here. You should be dehornin' Cragg instead of—"

Ignoring the bartender, Duane Redfern turned toward Cragg.

"Hit bad, Pop?"

"Hit?" Cragg repeated numbly. *Lucy's told him about me, else he wouldn't have called me Pop, the irrelevant thought flashed through his head. "I ain't hit, son . . ."*

"Like hell you ain't—"

C RAGG didn't feel his left-hand gun slip from his hand, but his eyes focused on the spreading crimson stain which was sopping his sleeve. Blood was trickling in warm streams from his fingertips. The first slow, flickering stabs of pain lanced up his shoulder then, and he knew the truth. That first shot of Pancho's had drilled through muscle and sinew to splinter his elbow.

The shock of bullet numbness passed. Cragg forced himself back to his feet, his wrecked arm dangling at his side.

"Redfern!" shouted Joe F lance. "As marshal, your duty is—"

Redfern silenced the Longhorn mayor with an angry oath. "I'm not your marshal, not till I'm sworn in. I come up here a couple days early to size up my new job. From what I've seen up to now, I ain't so sure I'm your man, Flance."

**C**RAGG GRINNED, a clammy ooze of perspiration popping from his flesh, but a triumphant song in his heart. Duane Redfern might have a gunhawk's rep down on the Rio Grande. The way things stacked up now, Cragg believed his gamble had paid off. Redfern was a Cragg. His sire's blood was counting here at the payoff . . .

"You—know where my jail is, son," Cragg whispered. "I'd be obliged if you trot these buckaroos along. I'll foller directly."

Joe Flance's face was a bloodless mask of anger and frustration as he watched Redfern haul Pancho Beetham off the floor. All the fight seemed to have fled from the Slash W crew as they obeyed Redfern's gesturing gun barrel and filed through the street door.

Cragg turned to meet Joe Flance's apoplectic stare.

"Looks like you picked the wrong man to fill my boots, Joe!" Cragg couldn't help one gloating jibe. "You figgered to turn Longhorn into a trap where your saloons and crooked gamblin' layouts could bleed the drovers white. You damned ignorant Yankee, it was me who sent for Redfern in the first place!"

Cragg braced his shoulders, fighting the nausea which assailed the pit of his stomach. He hefted the gun in his right hand, savoring the fierce exultation which kept him on his feet.

Flance licked his lips, uncertainty beginning to crack his iron front. He saw his deep-laid schemes evaporating in thin air, realized that this senile star-toter had been secretly pulling strings, out-witting Flance at his own game.

"I'm turnin' my star over to young Redfern in due time," Cragg bit out. "But, before I do, I'm carryin' out one last job while I'm bull of the herd around here. I'm givin' you yore choice of goin' to jail or lockin' up the Palace, Joe. And it'll stay locked up until Wetrip's out of Texas."

Flance lifted a flap in the bar counter and stepped out front, shrugging off his bar apron. Passing in front of Cragg's following gun muzzle, he gestured toward his house men at the nearby card table. They were all armed and they were waiting for Flance's signal to cut the marshal down.

"Redfern showing up unannounced alters the situation, men," Flance grunted. "I'm closing the house—temporarily."

Cragg, dribbling his blood across the sawdust-sprinkled floor, waited while the card players filed out of the batwings, Flance following them.

Out on the saloon porch, the marshal stood by while the mayor padlocked the batwings and unhooked the seldom-used outer doors of the Blue Palace, closing and locking them likewise.

"I'll impound those keys, Joe," Cragg said, holstering his gun and extending a rock-steady hand.

For the briefest of moments Flance hesitated. Then he passed over his keyring, saw Cragg pocket it.

Cragg wheeled and walked down the Blue Palace steps, turning east down Postoak. He found Duane Redfern waiting at the jail office, riding close herd on Beetham and the four Slash W cowboys.

When Cragg reached the jail steps he turned into the office and got his keys from the desk.

Five minutes later the Slash W troublemakers were behind cell bars and Cragg was locking the bullpen door. Duane Redfern stepped out into the marshal's office, scowling anxiously as he sized up the oldster's bleeding arm.

With a wry grin, Cragg turned to the younger man. Emotions which the town would never guess had put an ache in his throat as, for the first time, he had an opportunity to size up Redfern.

He found himself wondering why he had not recognized the man on the Rocking V horse, the moment he rode into town. Anybody, it seemed, should be able to detect the blood kinship of these two. Redfern had the same lithic cast of face, the same metal-blue eyes and rocky jaw of his sire. At thirty-one, Duane Redfern's massive torso and hard-calloused hands were a dead ringer for Giff Cragg in his prime . . .

"You're taking a quick *pasear* to a medico, old timer!" Redfern's voice came to Cragg's ears, muffled as if by remote distance. "You've lost a lot of blood—"

Cragg's good hand was plucking at the star on his vest.

"If you hadn't showed up a couple days early, I'd be buzzard bait in Flance's saloon this minute, son," Cragg whispered numbly. "I've gone stale. Rusted tight as a barn gate. It's time this—star—changed hands—"

Blackness swirled around the old lawman then. He was not aware of Duane Redfern leaping to catch his sagging body.

#### IV

LUCY PAIGE ELBOWED HER way through the press of Stetson-clad onlookers grouped in front of Doc Growbinder's office on Cinco Street, to find Duane Redfern posted at the doorway to keep out morbid spectators.

Redfern's eyes flashed their secret message to the girl as she gained the doorstep. The sickish-sweet effluvium of chloroform wafted from the doctor's office to assail the girl's nostrils.

"Duane—is Pop—is he hurt bad? I heard the shooting in the Palace—"

Redfern grinned harshly as he stepped aside to let her pass inside.

"He caught a slug in the left elbow. Doc Growbinder may amputate, may not. Sure you want to go in there?"

Lucy nodded, blinded with tears as she passed through the cowtown medico's outer office and stepped into the operating room. Old Cragg lay on Growbinder's table, covered with a sheet from the waist down. Growbinder was removing scalpels and probes, forceps and hemostats from a sterilizing kettle and arranging them neatly on a boiled towel alongside the table.

Cragg, she saw, was under the anesthetic, but a pulse was beating strongly on his weather-bronzed throat.

"Is it bad, Doc?" the girl asked in a choked whisper.

Growbinder snorted in his brush of whiskers and began swabbing the wound with a pad of sterile cotton, a gleaming probe poised in his right hand.

"Old marshals never die, Lucy," he

commented. "They wither up like a tumbleweed, but they don't cash in their chips from a bullet in the arm."

Lucy assisted the cowtown medico in splinting and bandaging the marshal's arm after Growbinder had removed the shapeless pellet of lead from the shattered tissues.

"Good girl," Growbinder complimented her. "He'll rally around shortly. That arm won't be worth a damn so far as gun-totin' is concerned, but with the new marshal here, Giff won't need to worry about that handicap nohow."

Duane Redfern joined the girl as she left the doctor's shack by a back door to avoid the curious throng out on Cinco Street. Walking across back lots toward the Trail House, Redfern waited until they were in the privacy of the hotel office before pulling her close and crushing her mouth to his own.

"You think a lot of that old star-toter," Redfern said, building a cigarette, some minutes later.

She nodded. "I love him next to my own father, Duane. He wrote you about taking over his job just to bring us together. That's the kind of man Giff Cragg is. Losing his star is no easy thing. It's his very life."

Duane Redfern eyed the girl through pluming cigarette smoke. For months he had hungered for her presence, but now in this moment of reunion he found his mind sliding off to other matters, concentrating on the old man who lay in Doc Growbinder's makeshift hospital.

"I drifted into town unannounced," Redfern said, "to sort of size up the lay of the land before I took over Cragg's job. I like to know where the weight lies in a new town."

Lucy Paige eyed him quizzically. "Did you find out why the mayor was so eager to hire you, Duane? There's so much about this that doesn't show on the surface. I didn't have a chance to write you before Joe Flance announced that you were on your way up here—"

Obscure lights kindled in Redfern's eyes. "Flance thinks he's hired my guns to make Longhorn wide open, like the other hell-holes up and down the Trail. I think—" Redfern paused to study the glowing coal on his cigarette—"I think

Mayor F lance is going to be asking for my resignation before too long. I don't intend to pin on a star just to make Longhorn safe for his saloons and gambling houses."

Lucy Paige's eyes glowed with love. "Duane, you've stepped into the picture just in time to see Pop face the toughest situation of his career," she said. "Moss Wetrip's crew will be showing up in Longhorn soon. Pop killed Wetrip's trail boss at the Palace last year. Everyone knows Slash W will be gunning for Pop the moment they hit town."

"Pop's proud, and he's game," Redfern mused. "I almost feel as if I'd known him all my life, instead of less than an hour. Lucy—I shan't gall him by taking over his star before he's squared his accounts with Moss Wetrip. Win, lose or draw—I figger that's how Pop wants it."

Leaving the Trail House, Redfern stabled his blue roan and returned to Doc Growbinder's. He was astonished to find that Giff Cragg had not only rallied out of the anesthetic, but was fully dressed even to the twin shellbelts around his middle. The marshal's ruined arm hung in a flour-sack sling across his chest.

"Let's go over to my office," Cragg suggested. "By rights, you should be wearin' my star now, son. But I got a personal deal to settle that's been a long time building up. If you can savvy—"

Duane Redfern laughed softly. "Moss Wetrip? He's your meat, marshal. You play out the hand that was dealt you before I sit in."

Reaching the jail office, Giff Cragg eased himself into his swivel chair and turned his inscrutable eye on the young man.

"Might as well git acquainted, son," he said finally. "Goes without saying, all Texas knows how you cleaned up San 'Tone an' Tascosa. Further than that, you're just a waddy that Lucy Paige fell in love with. But she hasn't told me much about you."

**R**EDFERN LEANED the point of his shoulder against the iron door of the bull pen and regarded the old marshal thoughtfully.

"Not much to tell, Cragg," he said. "Grew up in San Antone. My mother

was a school teacher, my father a buffalo hunter. They both died before I was old enough to remember them. In a cholera epidemic."

Cragg averted his eyes. He hadn't known that. Old memories swirled about him, a nostalgia that left him mute. He pulled himself back to reality to see Duane Redfern holding out a gold locket.

"This locket belonged to my mother," he grinned. "It's all I have to recall my parents."

Giff Cragg sucked a breath to the bottom of his lungs as he found himself staring at a tintype inside the locket. It was a duplicate, save for minor variations in pose, of the picture he had carried inside his turnip watch for three decades.

"You—you've done right well for an orphan, son," Cragg said huskily. "Now about you and Lucy Paige—I've knowed her since she was knee-high to the loadin' gate of a Winchester, son. Mind tellin' an old man yore future plans?"

"We aim to get married as soon as the trail drive season slacks off this fall," Redfern said softly.

Cragg looked up, meeting the young gunhawk's steady gaze as he handed back the locket which he himself had given to Patrice Redfern in the dim, half-forgotten past. It eased an old hurt in his heart, knowing she had kept that locket.

"Don't put off that weddin', boy. Wearin' a marshal's star in this town is the same as havin' your lease on life expire and be renewed every hour of the day or night. No sense in gamblin' on missin' out on even an hour's happiness. You see, son, I—"

A swelling roar of hoofbeats drummed down the false-fronted channel of Pos-toak Street, the swift crescendo of thundering hoofs making the flimsy walls of the jail office tremble.

Lifting himself from his chair, Giff Cragg hobbled swiftly to the jailhouse door and peered through the dust at the fast blurring passage of riders streaking past.

Whooping shrilly and shooting the sky full of holes, the Texans reined to a dusty halt in front of the Blue Palace saloon, swung out of stirrups and started hitching up at F lance's tie rack.

Moss Wetrip and his Slash W bunch,"

Cragg grunted succinctly. He was speaking to himself, as if he had forgotten the reality of his successor's presence.

Redfern remained in the jailhouse doorway as old Cragg stepped down onto the spur-scuffed plank sidewalk and headed up Post oak, crossing Cinco Street just as the newly-arrived trail crew assembled in front of the locked doors of Joe F lance's place.

Moss Wetrip's massive figure dominated the group of chap-clad, gun-hung riders. He was a giant of a man, bull-necked and barrel-chested, in his middle forties. The beginnings of a paunch showed where his tight-buckled shellbelts crisscrossed his midriff.

Rattling the knob of the Blue Palace door, the Slash W boss swung around to speak to his riders—when he caught sight of Giff Cragg's raw-boned shape mounting the steps at the far end of the wooden-awned porch.

"What's this, Cragg?" demanded Wetrip, all his old hates flashing in his eyes as the man with the star approached. "Has Joe F lance gone out of business since we were here last?"

Cragg shook his head, his narrowed gaze ranging over the hostile faces of the Slash W crew, recognizing men who had seen him smoke down Jutt Leedom a year ago, inside this very saloon. They were here, the first of the Chisholm Trail outfits to reach the Red, and they were obviously loaded for bear.

"F lance's place is locked up permanent, so far as Slash W is concerned," Cragg said levelly. "If you're lookin' for Pancho Beetham and the gunslingers you sent up ahead this mornin', you'll find them down at my calaboose."

Moss Wetrip's gooseberry-green eyes took on a lethal glint. "You've jailed my riders? For what?"

Cragg motioned toward his bandaged ram.

"For shootin' a law officer, for one thing. You can stick around for their trial, if you want. Unless you're in a rush to get your beef to Dodge."

Moss Wetrip rubbed his whisker-stubbed jaw thoughtfully, keeping a tight curb on his mounting temper. It was inconceivable that this broken-down old gaffer could have man-handled men like

tough Pancho Beetham and the others.

"I see," the Nueces ranchers drawled finally. "It's plain you didn't get a certain letter I sent up the trail yesterday by a saddle bum—"

Cragg glanced around. He saw Joe F lance emerging from the Jack of Diamonds gambling hall across the street, heading toward the Blue Palace to join Wetrip's crew.

"I got a letter," Cragg admitted, "which the writer didn't have the guts to sign."

Wetrip's flush receded, leaving his face skull-white.

"This trial you speak of," Wetrip changed the subject abruptly for obscure reasons of his own. "When's it coming off?"

Cragg shrugged. "That depends on Judge Campbell's court docket over at the county seat," he said. "Mebbe a month from now. Mebbe sooner."

Joe F lance elbowed through the ranks of Slash W punchers, breaking the tension which held the group. Words passed between F lance and Wetrip which the marshal's half-deaf ears couldn't catch.

Whatever the cowtown mayor had told Wetrip, Cragg saw that the Slash W boss had dismissed his half-formed intention of forcing a gun fight here on the street.

"I'm riding back to see my herd bedded down for the night, marshal," Wetrip said, turning to Cragg. "I'll expect Pancho and my other drivers to show up at the Slash W chuck wagon before sundown. If they ain't back, I'll come for 'em. Get that?"

C RAGG remained on the Blue Palace porch after Wetrip's bunch had fogged out of town. They were accompanied by Joe F lance, the significance of which was not lost on the old lawman.

Duane Redfern, toting his warsack over from the livery barn on his way to the Trail House, halted in front of the saloon for a last word with the oldster.

"Wetrip will pull your jail down brick by brick tonight, Pop. He's not running because you've buffaloed him."

Cragg nodded, grinning enigmatically.

"No, he ain't. Slash W aims to pry the lid off Longhorn before sun-up tomorrow, I grant you that."

Redfern shifted the weight of his war-

sack on a husky shoulder. "Better swear me in as a deputy, Pop."

Cragg shook his head.

"I'll handle this myself, thanks. All I ask is that you keep Lucy off the streets tonight."

## V

**M**OSS WETRIP'S SUNDOWN deadline found Pancho Beetham and his four trail partners cleaning up the supper trays which Cliff Cragg brought them from the Trail House restaurant.

As night pooled in swathing violet waves across the Texas flats, Cragg kept his eye on the sprawled blot of the big Slash W pool herd which was bedded down a mile from town.

The import of Slash W's nearness had laid its oppressive weight over the trail town. Mothers called their children off the streets in response to some tacit curfew. The darkened windows of the Blue Palace were matched by other deadfalls up and down Postoak Street which ordinarily would have been ablaze with light, inviting the season's first drovers.

Over in the jailhouse, the Slash W prisoners were in high spirits, knowing they were the focal point of tonight's unrest. From the barred windows of their cells they could see Wetrup's campfire light winking and shuttering across the starlit distance. Help would not be long in coming their way. And what chance did a one-armed, stove-up marshal have of stemming the tide of violence which he would inevitably have to face, single-handed?

For his part, Giff Cragg appeared to be making little if any preparation for the defense of the jail. Shortly before sundown he had accosted his deputy, Slats McBride, eating supper at the Trail House and had advised that individual not to report for duty at midnight. That order saved McBride the humiliation of carrying out his decision to take off his star.

As darkness congealed over the town, Cragg busied himself with mysterious activity in his furnace shed out behind the jail. He had a fire going in the brick furnace, heating the water in the old Red River ferryboat boiler.

Stoking the firebox with cordwood rick- ed alongside the jail, Cragg kept an eye

on the steam gauge on the boilerhead, until the pressure approached the limit of the safety valve. Then he banked his fire, closed the grate door, and shuffled his way around to the front office. There, he unlocked the iron door leading to the bullpen.

At ten o'clock, Cragg lit his meerschaum and locked up his jail office. By now, every establishment on Postoak Street was dark, precluding the necessity of making his usual tour of the trail town's trouble spots.

The street appeared to be completely deserted. Longhorn, instead of celebrating the arrival of the season's first herd from the *brasada* country, had become a ghost town.

The clock in the schoolhouse belfry was chiming twelve midnight when Giff Cragg, seated on the porch of the saddle shop across Postoak from the jail, saw riders materializing out of the night, coming from the direction of the Slash W bedground.

He might be getting deaf, but Cragg imagined he heard the creaking of leather as men off-saddled, the metallic clink of bit rings as a dozen or more riders dismounted in a copse of dwarf hickory down by the Red River crossing, the site of Cragg's old camp in by-gone years before Longhorn had assumed the proportions of a Chisholm Trail town.

Easing his gun out of leather, Cragg checked the loads in the cylinder with a practised thumb. Then he strained his failing eyes, probing the darkness until he saw the first of a group of skulking figures arrive in front of the weather-bleached clapboard front of the jailhouse office.

Watching from across the street, Cragg saw sombreroed riders getting a wagon tongue ready to use as a battering ram. One of the group mounted the front steps and hammered on the locked door with a gun barrel, his warning shout echoing spectrally off Longhorn's false front.

"Open up, marshal. We've come for your prisoners."

A long silence followed. Then, at a grunted signal from their leader, the men assembled in front of the Longhorn jail swung their wagon tongue in unison.

Wood panelling splintered and metal made its abrasive crash as the wagon tongue hit the flimsy door, shattering its



lock. As the door crashed inwards, a shout went up from the jail-breakers.

Cragg stepped to the front edge of the saddle shop porch. He heard a thunder of spurred boots resounding on the door of his office as Wetrip's drovers trooped inside, surprised at this easy conquest of their first barrier.

A triumphant voice reached his ears. "The bullpen door ain't locked men. Cragg must have lit a shuck.

Giff Cragg left the saddle shop porch then, moving swiftly across the street to enter his office. Pandemonium filled the interior of the cell block. Wetrip's crew had gathered in front of Beetham's cell.

With reckless disregard for his own safety, Giff Cragg crossed his office and pulled the iron door of the bull pen shut, easing down the heavy outer bar in its sockets to pen the jail breakers inside the brick-walled enclosure.

**G**UNSHOTS thundered their deafening chorus inside the cell block as the Slash W bunch began their attempt to shoot off the locks of the steel-barred cages to free their saddle mates.

Cragg did not tarry in the front office. Heading outside, he trotted down the black alley between the jail and the livery barn next door and ducked into his furnace room.

In the darkness, his arthritic hands groped for and found the big valve which led from the churning steam boiler. A two-inch pipe led into the bullpen from the boiler, the inlet for the system of heating pipes which Cragg had intended to build inside the jail during the coming months.

One revolution of the valve wheel sent a deafening jet of live steam into the jail. The roar of the escaping steam drowned the dismayed reaction of the men trapped within.

Mentally counting off one minute's elapsed time, Giff Cragg closed the boiler valve and went outside. Under the nearest cell window, the old marshal shouted his orders:

"Pitch your shootin' irons out of the west winder, gents. You got thirty seconds to fork over before I turn that valve on again and scald you like a barbecue calf on a spit!"

White steam, vaporizing inside the jail, was pouring out of the cell windows, wisping under the eaves. Wetrip's crew knew by now that they were at Cragg's mercy, that they were helplessly imprisoned in what amounted to a brick torture-chamber.

One by one, six-guns and rifles began cascading through the west window of the bull pen, landing in the alley at Cragg's feet. When the last gun had come hurtling out of the steam-jetting window, Cragg lifted his voice again.

"Sing out, Wetrip. I'll tell you what to do next, before I give you tough cases another dose of live steam."

There was a momentary silence from the steam-filled bullpen.

Then the hoarse voice of the breed cavy wrangler, Pancho Beetham, made uncertain answer:

"The boss ain't in here, marshal. I swear it!"

Cragg stiffened, the hairs on his neck-nape prickling. "All right—have Joe Flance show his face at the window."

Beetham shouted desperately, "Flance ain't here either. Don't touch that steam contraption, marshal, for the love of Pete—you'll cook us alive!"

Instinct rather than anything he saw or heard, caused Giff Cragg to whirl around to face the rear of the jail alley then. He glimpsed two shapes silhouetted against the star-powdered horizon, coming from the direction of the livery barn corrals. Moss Wetrip and Joe Flance, moving up fast—

Before he could get his gun to a level, the marshal saw the stabbing nozzle of flame spit from the bore of Wetrip's gun. A sledgehammer blow caught Cragg on the hip and dropped him back against the jail wall.

He forced himself to hold his gun centered on the fuzzy blurred shape that was Wetrip's running figure, waiting for the Slash W boss to get within point-blank range.

Joe Flance triggered a shot and his bullet snashed the marshal in the side. He felt the white lash of pain go through him as he tripped gunhammer, saw Wetrip's headlong rush checked.

Blackness spun about the marshal as he saw the bull-sized Slash W rancher go

down, stopped cold by Cragg's lead. But behind Joe Flance other black shapes were taking form, Slash W riders running in from the open prairie. It seemed incredible that Slash W had brought such a sizeable crew over for this jailbreak attempt, that only half their number were trapped in the jail.

"Cragg's down, men!" Joe Flance was yelling, waving his henchmen toward the alley. "He'll have the keys to those cells on him——"

Then, above the roaring in his head, Giff Cragg heard a gun explode behind him, close at hand. He twisted around to see a tall shape emerge from the livery stable's side door, and he knew then that he was caught in a cross-fire.

Flame was spitting from the guns of the newcomer who had been crouching inside the stable's clotted shadows. Incredibly, those fast-shooting Colts were aimed at Wetrip's drovers, not at him.

Cragg felt his consciousness slipping as the black vortex caught him, engulfed him. Through it, as if from a great void of distance, he heard Duane Redfern's voice close to his ear.

"It's finished, Pop. Flance is down and the others are high-tailing it . . ."

**A** FRESH BREEZE off the sage-scented prairie was stirring the curtains of a Trail House bedroom window when Cragg rallied out of it. He was lying on a bed, between cool sheets, and morning sunlight was shafting down on him.

Pain throbbed at isolated points on his withered frame, at his hip and on his side just under the ribs, but he felt strangely at peace.

Glancing around the room, Cragg saw vague shapes swim into focus in the bright Texas sunlight. Familiar faces. Duane Redfern and Lucy Paige, standing at the foot of his bed. Hovering closer at hand was the old sawbones, Doc Growbinder, a stethoscope swinging from his ears.

"Time you come to, Giff," Growbinder was grumbling. "You've already missed seein' Joe Flance an' Moss Wetrip take their one-way ride to boothill. The Slash W crew didn't even stick around for the

funeral. Them that weren't penned up in your steam-heated calaboose rattled their hocks across the river to let their trail herd shift for itself."

Giff Cragg, groping hard to comprehend what Growbinder was saying, propped himself up on one elbow to stare at something the cowtown medico held in his hand.

It was the bullet-drilled remains of his turnip watch. Remembering the hammer blow on his hip, Wetrip's first shot, Cragg understood. His watch had absorbed the full brunt of that drilling impact.

The marshal of Longhorn swung his gaze to the other side of the bed, in time to see the doctor hand his shattered time-piece over to Duane Redfern. There was a strange grin plucking at the corners of the young town-tamer's lips as he held up the misshapen watch case so that Cragg could see the bullet-punctured tintype photograph soldered on its inner side.

"Where'd you get this picture, Pop?" Redfern wanted to know.

Cragg closed his eyes and grinned. "That's a photygraph of me an' my wife an' baby son. It—it makes a tol'able long story, how I come to have it. Mebbe after you an' Lucy get married, some time I'll tell that story to your children."

Lucy Paige bent over the wasted figure on the bed and kissed Giff Cragg on the mouth.

"Duane's taking the advice you gave him, Pop," she whispered. "We're getting married today. In this very room. The padre's on his way here from San Castro."

Giff Cragg opened his eyes again, this time to find Duane Redfern kneeling beside him. A tarnished star with the brass showing through its silver plating was pinned to Redfern's shirt.

"We can't wait for your grandchildren to show up to hear that story, Pop," Duane grinned. "I got a hunch I know most of the details, anyhow."

Giff Cragg closed his eyes, not wanting to break the spell of this moment.

"Grandchildren," he repeated, awed by the shape of the word on his tongue. "Pop . . . Call me that again, son. It sounds—mighty fine. I've waited a plumb long spell to hear you call me that."