

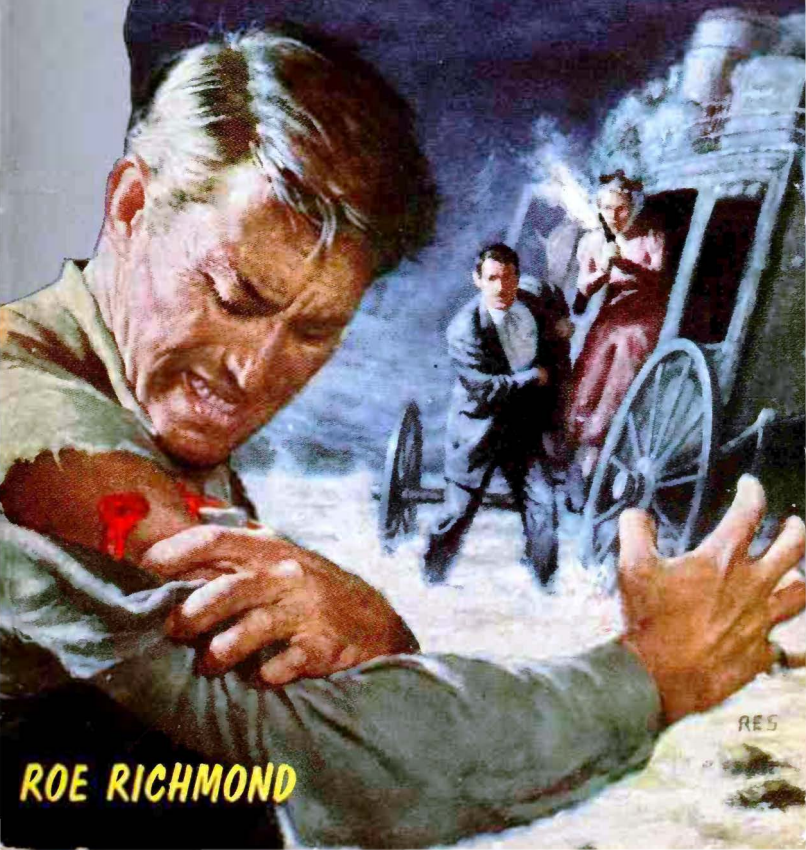
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THE
COMPLETE
BOOK

DEATH RIDES THE DONDRINO

A gun-slinging search for revenge in a valley
ruled by hate



ROE RICHMOND

RES

MARTY RENNER had ridden too many trails that led to nowhere, punched too many cows that weren't his own. Seven years ago he had left the Dondrino—a kid whose father had called him a coward. Now he was returning a grown man, fast with his hands, quick with a gun.

And he was due to get plenty of action. Old Rawhide Renner was dead—murdered! His big Mill Iron spread was owned by a stranger. Someone had wanted Rawhide out of the way—and now they aimed to send his son to Boothill, too.

But Marty didn't see it that way. It was one man against a valley ruled by fear and hate. But Rawhide's killer was going to die—and die hard!

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DEATH RIDES the DONDRINO

by
Roe Richmond



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For DAD (1879–1946) and KEN (1912–1939)

This country was built on guts and whiskey
and gunpowder.

—RAWHIDE RENNER
Utah Territory, 1870

DEATH RIDES *the* DONDRINO

I

RENNER woke with reluctance. Something made this morning different. He groaned then, remembering his decision to go home. A drunken notion, of course, but one that had been recurring lately. But where to, if not home? He had been going nowhere way too long. At twenty-six Martin Renner felt old and spent, the complete failure his father had predicted.

He got up stiffly, aching in every muscle, and looked down at the gashed knuckles of his big left hand. He'd hit Joffey a good one last night. Glad he hadn't had to use a gun. Renner wished Tansill had come himself instead of sending Joff. He would have killed Tansill and ended the matter. He'd have to do it sometime.

It wasn't any more fun without Glenway. Glen, dead and buried now south of the Rio Grande, where scoured sand hills rolled away toward the Sierra Madre. . . . We should never have trusted Coke Tansill and his crew anyway, Renner thought, although the mustanging went well enough at first. Until the pack turned on us and killed Glenway, and I was lucky to make the river and El Paso.

Now Renner was sick of drifting, of peeling brons and punching cattle and chasing wild horses. He wanted to see his father and try to make friends with him. He wanted to see Emily Hale again, even if she was married and had a bunch of kids. And a few others: Guy Ormond and Doc Seabrey, Benny Blue and Old Jubal. So he was going home to Utah.

Most of all he wanted to show his father he had become a good all-around hand and fighting man, in spite of Rawhide's words: *"I don't know where in hell I got you! You'll never amount to a goddamn!"*

Downstairs at the desk Renner paid his bill and started out with his saddlebags. The town marshal waited by the entrance, gnawing at his gray mustache. "That fella you hit

last night," he said, almost apologetically. "That Joffey. He never come to. He's dead, mister."

"Is that true, Marshal?" It was difficult for Renner to believe. Joffey's head must have struck the brass rail at the base of the bar. "I slugged him to keep him from drawing. Plenty people saw it."

"I know that, son. Accidental. But I got to hold you a little. Until after the inquest."

Renner shook his head slowly. "Don't try to, Marshal."

The older man chewed sorrowfully on his tobacco. "I ain't young enough to take you. Have to git my deputies. If I can roust any out."

"I'm not going to jail for that," Renner said. "I had to hit him—or shoot him."

"Don't know as I blame you, but I got my duty." The marshal tugged at his drooping mustache. "I'll be lookin' for my deputies."

"Give me time to ride out," said Renner.

The man considered gravely. "You'll have time, you don't stop for breakfast." He turned wearily away toward the door.

Renner grinned. "Much obliged, Marshal. Not hungry this morning anyway." He went around back to the livery barn and saddled up his coyote dun, the horse bucking a bit when he first got on. Nobody appeared in the street to stop him. Renner turned north, the sun bright and the wind ruffling the chinaberry trees and poplars. Good or bad, he was going home, back to Brandvil on the Dondrino River.

A lone rider, lonelier than ever with Glen gone. Always a lonesome one, for that matter. His mother had died a few years after his birth, and Rawhide blamed him for that, he supposed. The old man had given all his love to the elder brother Doak. And Doak had been shot to death at twenty, by a gunfighter named Wolf Leiken. Martin *knew* his father held him responsible in that instance. Sixteen at the time, Mart had been there when it happened, but he hadn't had a gun and couldn't have used one anyway. He'd been frozen with fear. The horror of that moment was still with him.

Maybe Rawhide was old enough now to need some help himself. If he needed help with a gun that was one thing Mart could give him.

Martin Renner rode on, watching the back trail but not really expecting a posse. Still Coke Tansill or some of his men might be following up Joffey. . . . The rawboned dun was strong and steady under Renner. *Puro español* with dark mane and tail and a black stripe down the back. Much horse, in Mexican or any language.

"Come on, Spanish, we're going home," Martin Renner said, slack in the warm leather. "A place you've never been, horse, and it wasn't a real home to me. But that's where we're going."

He moved northward through desert and badlands country, savage scenes of colorful desolation, and the raw beauty of springtime touched him but did not satisfy him. The towns he saw were more American now, and it was a relief to get away from the Mexican-looking ones.

A week and several hundred miles later, the Taloncillo Mountains loomed in rugged grandeur before Martin Renner. Then he could see the deep-notched pass of Red Gap, and beyond lay the Dondrino Valley, Rawhide Renner's great Mill Iron spread, and the town of Brandvil, in Utah Territory.

"Home stretch, Spanish," he told the horse. "God's country after what we been through, with real woods and grass and water."

It was pleasant when the steep walls of Red Gap shut out the blazing afternoon. Relaxed in his sweated saddle, Renner let the dun set his own pace up the long winding grade. Over the hump and home—if you could call it that. The Dondrino was Rawhide's country, Brandvil his town, but Martin had never been fully at home there. Or anywhere else either. . . . He wondered how Rawhide would greet his no-good runaway black sheep son.

The incline sharpened, between jumbles of brush-grown boulders, and the *bayo coyote* grunted with the effort of climbing. Renner wondered idly how *bayo* had come to mean dun, in Mexican, when it was Spanish for bay. Craggy redstone cliffs towered on either side, scarred by slides and fringed raggedly with stunted oak and cedar and jackpine. Higher up were the true forests of aspen and pine. Renner pulled up to rest his mount, and drank in the deep-shaded

solitude and peace of the uplands, cool and refreshing as spring water.

He heard the solid impact near his right knee, and felt the dun shudder and lurch beneath him. Then the horse was falling, and Renner was kicking out of the stirrups and jumping clear. From the heights on the right side of the pass, the bellow of a high-powered rifle boomed out and rolled echoing away. Dust clouded the trail as the gelding snorted and thrashed about before slumping into heavy stillness. Renner raked his carbine out of the boot and hit the gravel behind the body of the horse.

Now what the hell? he thought, anger rising through his shocked numbness. Another shot geysered dirt in midroad, the report roaring and crashing off the rock faces above, and Renner lined his barrel over the saddle and fired three fast shots at the gun smoke on the mountainside. Not much chance of hitting anything, but he might pin the man down or drive him away.

Renner wondered who could be shooting at him—and why? He had enemies, but none that he knew of in these parts. That sounded and struck like an old buffalo gun, a Sharps .56 or .58, a regular cannon. That jasper up there wasn't fooling. None of Tansill's boys had a weapon of that caliber. They were more or less obsolete now anyway. Nobody in the Dondrino knew Mart Renner was heading homeward, unless somebody from Brandvil had spotted him somewhere down the line and brought back the word. Even so, why should anyone up here want to kill him? . . . Renner couldn't figure it out. Maybe it was just some half-crazy hermit who liked to take long-range shots at riders in this mountain pass.

He fired again at that lofty perch where smoke was thinning along the escarpment. There was no response. Renner slid back into the ditch and crawled behind a rock cluster that afforded better protection and permitted more freedom of movement. He hammered another shot up the cliff, but there was no return. Maybe the sniper didn't fancy dueling with his single-shot weapon against a repeater, and had banked everything on a couple of tries and then pulled out.

But Renner stayed under cover, not caring to risk stop-

ping a slug that would knock over a horse or a bull buffalo. He felt his heart beating against the ground, and saw the flies settling on the dead mustang. A horse like Spanish, the best he'd ever had, better than any of Rawhide's prize thoroughbreds on Mill Iron. It was almost as bad as losing Glenway. That coyote dun could do anything. Cutting, roping, nighthawking, working stock in general. And he could outrun and outlast any of them. Now he was dead meat beside a mountain trail. Renner swallowed his bitterness and felt sick and hollow.

Everything I love dies, Renner thought morbidly, breathing in the odor of damp earth and leaf mold and green-
ing ferns. Mother . . . Doak . . . Glen . . . Spanish . . .
and Emily Hale might as well be dead, as far as I'm concerned.

There was no more shooting from above. Renner shaped and smoked a cigarette there, before getting up to remove his bridle and saddle gear from the dead horse.

An hour later, burdened with all his gear and the humiliation of a horseman reduced to walking, Martin Renner was plodding wearily toward the summit of the pass. This was going to be a fine homecoming, horseless and down to a few dollars. He could picture the scorn in his father's stormy eyes and rugged face. Rawhide had no use for failures, no pity for the unfortunate.

Soaked with sweat and panting in the thin highland air, Renner labored onward, the saddle, rifle and equipment dragging heavily at his arms. High-heeled boots and long bowed legs were not made for hiking, yet he moved well on foot, for a rider. At the crest he paused to set down the cumbersome gear and rinse his mouth from the canteen. After a short drink he took off his hat and let the wind cool his damp reddish-bronze head.

Standing there at ease Renner was tall and rangy with a strong spread of shoulders, a limber leanness at waist and flank. A much bigger man than he'd been when he left this country, and there were other changes. Not many people would recognize him in Brandvil. His smile came, quick and boyish, as he heard the clatter of a stagecoach behind and

below in the mountain passage. At least he wouldn't have to walk all the way in.

The driver hauled up at Renner's signal, the six horses lathered from the climb, and the shotgun guard watched him warily.

"Accident, friend?" asked the man with the reins. "Saw a dead horse down yonder."

Renner nodded. "Like a lift into Brandvil."

"Plenty room. Throw your stuff in the rear boot, mister."

There were only three passengers in the Concord. A well-dressed couple occupied the back seat, and a fancy-shirted young man sprawled across the front, sound asleep and exuding a powerful reek of whiskey. Renner hesitated at the door.

"I can just as well ride on top."

The woman smiled and gestured. "There's room in here, if you don't mind—" Her delicate nostrils twitched slightly.

"Thank you, ma'am." Renner climbed inside with a grin. "I'd rather drink it than inhale it, as a rule. But I guess I can stand a few miles of it."

The gentleman leaned forward on the other side of the lady. "I told you, Cynthia, we should have had that drunk transferred to the top deck."

"Let him sleep, Dake. He's such a boy, such a nice-looking boy. It's really a shame." She was sympathetic and understanding. Pretty regular and considerate, for a woman of class and quality, Renner decided. And mighty handsome in a proud blonde fashion, her features clear as cameo.

The coach lurched forward and dipped into the downgrade, swaying on its leather thoroughbraces, the reach-and-bolster crashing in under the floor boards, the brakes rasping in complaint. The man introduced himself as Dake Tirone, and the lady as Mrs. Somebody—Renner couldn't catch the name. In return he gave them his Christian name, not wishing to identify himself at once as old Rawhide Renner's boy.

"Your horse back there?" inquired Tirone. "Too bad, looked like a good bronc. You had to shoot him, I suppose?"

"Not me," Renner said dryly. "Somebody else did the job."

They both stared at him, and Cynthia said, "You mean—"

"Obviously," Tirone said, frowning, "Mr. Martin must have enemies hereabouts."

"Got some scattered around the country," Renner admitted. "But I didn't know I had any in these parts."

"There are lawless elements everywhere in the West," said Tirone. "The Dondrino is no exception, although we try to keep them down. You have come from some distance, Martin?"

Renner nodded but declined to comment further, suddenly conscious of his worn dirty clothing in contrast to their groomed elegance, and Tirone reverted to casual conversation with the woman. They seemed well acquainted but not intimate. Their talk was of general inconsequential things.

They were friendly enough, occasionally and politely trying to include Renner in their discussion, but he had grown aloof and silent, aware of the breach that separated them. They were people of position and wealth, while he was just a drifting rider—without even a horse now. Renner had renounced the heritage that would have placed him on an equal plane with such folks. He was more akin to the young rounder on the opposite seat.

The sleeping boy was slender and somehow graceful, even in a drunken sprawl, with black curls tousled above the flushed, fine-featured face, the skin smooth and flawless as a girl's. White teeth shone between sensitive parted lips that were chapped and dry now. His shirt, gaudy with red and blue checks on a gray background, was soiled and torn. A holstered gun and belt lay at his booted feet, and a hat was crushed under his shapely dark head.

Ought to have a talk with that boy, Renner thought. A kid that don't hardly shave yet, starting out like I did, crazy-wild and bound straight for hell.

The stage was rocking down the other side of Red Gap, leaving the pines and aspens of the divide, winding and dropping toward the broad sweeping plains of the Dondrino. Old Rawhide Renner's valley. His son was wishing he had stayed away from it now. No good could come from this return.

He had been a fool to ride back here. A pure hundred-per-

cent thoroughbred damn fool. Always had been, always would be—until a slug caught up with him, or a bronc rolled on him, or a herd trampled him under.

Renner was going straight into town without stopping off at the ranch. He had to get cleaned up before he saw his father. He wondered if little old Benny Blue was still peeling broncs on Mill Iron. He looked forward to seeing Benny and Doc Seabrey. And most of all Guy Ormond, who had taken him hunting and fishing in these mountains, and was more like a father to him than Rawhide had ever been. . . . Now that he was nearly home, Renner felt reluctant to face his dad, afraid to discover what the years had done to Emily Hale. His first girl, and the only one that mattered.

"Almost to my station, Cynthia," announced Dake Tirone, as they threaded through foothills and leveled off on the lowlands at the foot of the pass.

The next stop would be for Mill Iron, and Renner wondered what this Eastern-looking man could be going there for. Dake Tirone smiled pleasantly at him, saying: "If you should want a job in this country, Martin, come out and see me at Mill Iron Ranch."

Renner masked his surprise, drawling, "Thanks, but I don't figure on hanging around long." So the old man had put this dude to bossing the spread? Rawhide must be sick or out of his mind or something.

"You have friends in the Dondrino—as well as enemies?" asked Tirone.

Renner shook his rusty brown head. "Just fiddle-footed, I reckon. Drifting and looking for something on the other side of the hill." This Tirone had charm, as well as poise and dignity, he thought. A smooth-polished article, Dake Tirone, with substance and strength beneath the veneer. Tailored to perfection in expensive broadcloth, with the bearing of one born to command. Handsome in a refined aristocratic way, but not the dude he had seemed at first. Maybe Rawhide wasn't so wrong, after all.

"Well, if you should change your mind and stay," Tirone said, "I'll be glad to be of any assistance." He gestured north of the westward-running road. "Big layout, Martin. We can always use a good hand."

Renner thanked him again. He could see the small log station with the Mill Iron sign and brand, and he visualized the familiar ranch buildings on the Little Don to the north. Off in the northwest lay the gloomy tangled wastes of Sangaree Swamp, dark and sunken, mysterious and out of place in this country of rich rolling grasslands. Renner remembered exploring that weird drowned area with Benny Blue, a decade or more in the past.

Two men lolled on the porch, with three saddle horses at the rack before them. Renner recognized that pair vaguely, and groped back in memory for their names. They had bullied and picked on him some, after Doak was killed and Rawhide's dislike of Martin became more evident. The thin one was Prager, Cactus Prager, and the bulky man was Pat Mulcahy. When the stage rolled to a halt in front of the log structure, they rose and waited with the same deference and respect they used to accord Rawhide Renner. Tirone had them well trained all right.

Dake Tirone shook hands with Renner, lifted his hat and bowed to Cynthia, and stepped out with effortless grace. He was bigger than he had appeared sitting down, well built and easy-moving, and he no doubt wore a shoulder-holstered gun under that immaculate coat, and could use it with speed and precision. Old Rawhide's judgment was still keen. It would be a sad mistake indeed, Renner reflected, to underestimate this Dake Tirone.

When the coach was in motion once more, Renner became painfully aware of the perfumed proximity of the blonde lady, and of his own ragged sweaty dishevelment. She remained in the middle of the seat, instead of shifting to the corner Tirone had vacated, and the jouncing of the vehicle threw her against Renner once in a while. The pressure of thigh and hip, arm and shoulder, burned and stirred him, and set him to speculating about the woman.

"Tirone seems like a nice fellow," Renner ventured awkwardly. "He's got a big ranch out here, I take it?"

"Yes, Dake runs the Mill Iron. The largest ranch in the valley."

"Don't look like a cattleman though."

"Well, he is. And a very good one, Mr. Martin."

"Can't always tell," admitted Renner. He indicated the slumbering boy on the other seat. "You know this kid here, ma'am?"

Cynthia smiled. "Not really, but I've heard a lot about him. A wild youngster called Shelby—the only name he uses, I believe. Isn't it a pity, to see a boy like that in such a condition?"

"Maybe I can help him some."

"You're very kind, Mr. Martin."

Renner grinned shyly. "It's not that, ma'am. I've been through it myself, that's all."

"And you mastered your weakness? That's highly commendable."

"Mostly, I think. Still slip a little sometimes, but not too bad."

The woman regarded him with frank interest, apparently not offended by his coppery beard stubble and trail-worn garb. Her eyes were intensely blue, with strange deep lights, and her mouth was lush and sensuous in that patrician face. She swayed toward him as the stage bounced, her leg and arm scalding against his, and Renner felt that strong magnetic current between them.

He had learned about the opposite sex, as he had grown to know horses and cattle. Generally when a girl looked and acted this way, and that current flowed from her to him and back, Renner knew he could have her. His throat was taut and dry now, and there was a deep warm stirring within him. She was wholly feminine and desirable, yet somehow he was slightly repelled. . . . Here was a woman who took what she wanted, did as she pleased, and scorned the consequences. A very dangerous lady.

Renner fumbled out tobacco sack and papers to build himself a smoke, and Cynthia settled back on the cushions with a cool inscrutable smile.

As the stage rattled into Brandvil in its rolling dust cloud, red-hazed in the lowering sun of late afternoon, Martin Renner observed that the town had grown considerably and changed somewhat. More street lamps and stores, more paint on the buildings, smarter false fronts and signs, more brick structures and plate-glass windows. Brandvil had taken on

the aspects of civilization, but was still raw and tough and turbulent under the surface.

The Concord creaked to a jolting stop, and Renner swung out to help the blonde girl down.

He was ducking back inside to rouse young Shelby, when she tapped his shoulder. "The name is Cynthia Renner, Mr. Martin. Perhaps you will call on me—if you get lonely here." Her smile flashed and she turned away with lissome ease, leaving him stricken and staring after her.

The guard had clambered down over the front wheel, and Martin Renner turned to him. "That's Mrs. Renner?"

"Sure, old Rawhide's second wife. Or widow, I oughta say."

Renner went cold, empty and numb. "Rawhide's dead?"

"Nigh onto two years, son." The guard spat tobacco juice. "Come on, gimme a hand with this soused-up young hellion here. And don't forget to pay your fare—if you got money. If you ain't, we can make allowances for a man that had his horse shot under him."

"I've got money," Renner said dully. "How'd Rawhide die?"

"Suicide."

Renner laughed, harsh and mirthless. "Don't you ever believe it, mister!"

"To tell the truth," said the guard, winking and grinning wisely, "I never did."

II

SHELBY woke up and gazed around in bewilderment, as they hoisted him from the coach and set his feet down on the slat sidewalk. He stood upright, willowy and weaving a trifle, shaking his dark curly head. "Where's my gun?" His voice was slow and soft. Renner handed him his hat and gun belt, and went to get his own gear from the rear luggage boot. Shelby put on the crumpled hat and buckled on his gun, murmuring a thanks as Renner turned back to him and said, "Come on, kid."

"What've I done now?" the boy asked sadly. "You the law?"

"You haven't done anything and I'm not the law, but you're coming with me."

"Where to?"

"The hotel."

Shelby wagged his head negatively. "Uh-huh, I got to get a drink."

"I'll get a bottle for you," Renner said. "Let's go."

Shelby smiled. "Well, in that case, mister. But I got money of my own—for once. You want to get drunk?"

"Why not? But first I want to talk to you."

"Lemme carry some of that stuff, pardner." Shelby took the saddlebags and carbine, and they started for the nearby hotel. "That's the way to travel by stage—unconscious," Shelby said, walking pretty well now. "But I meant to stay awake and look at that yella-haired gal this trip. Probably the sleep did me more good though."

In the Brock House, Renner signed for a double room, left his saddle and bedroll in the cloakroom, and ordered a tub of hot water and a bottle of whiskey sent up. In the room Shelby stretched out on one of the beds and went to sleep again. Renner had shaved, bathed, and dressed in his last change of fresh clothing when the boy came to once more and called for whiskey.

After a couple of drinks Shelby fell back on the bed and started snoring quietly. "Our talk'll have to wait, son," said Renner. "Just as well if you can sleep right through." He left a glass of whiskey on the table, hid the bottle in his saddlebags so the kid wouldn't guzzle too much, and went out to get some supper and look the old home town over. It still seemed impossible that his father was dead.

Rawhide had been so full of life, energy and power, a great lusty giant of a man, ageless, tireless and indestructible. Martin had attained a height of six-one, a weight of one-eighty-five, but Rawhide would have towered inches taller and outweighed him by forty pounds. And Rawhide could always ride, work and fight with men thirty years younger than himself. . . . But Rawhide was dead and gone, and a smooth gent named Dake Tirone had Mill Iron, and a blonde

beauty called Cynthia presided over the town house. And there was something rotten about the whole affair.

Rawhide Renner never would have committed suicide. Nothing could have driven a man like that to killing himself. Someone had murdered Rawhide, and made it look like suicide. Whoever it was must have been real clever, to deceive Guy Ormond in particular and the Dondrino in general.

So my father is dead, two years dead, Martin Renner mused, as he ate mechanically in the hotel dining room. There was never any love or affection between us. He lost the two he loved and wanted, Mother and Doak, and was left with the one he could not stand. Rawhide just didn't like me. It showed every time he looked at me. There was always some shade of contempt in his eyes when they glanced my way.

And I didn't love my father, because he wouldn't let me. In fact, I sometimes hated him with the bitter burning hatred of a scorned and rejected child. But in spite of that, I guess I did admire and respect the old man. I was proud of him, without realizing it. . . . And now I feel cheated of my last chance to get acquainted with him, to prove myself, stand beside him against his enemies, and make Rawhide accept me finally as a man and his son.

That chance was gone forever, and it left Renner even more aimless, lost and futile than before.

But he knew, as well as if he'd seen it done, that his father had been murdered, and something in his blood cried out for finding who did it and why, and for making them pay for it. . . . After all, he thought, I am his son, the last of his own flesh and blood, and there is a fortune here that belongs to me, by rights. Even if Rawhide disowned me, it is mine more than it is the widow's and Tirone's. . . .

Renner would have to go and see Guy Ormond, the banker and real estate dealer, who had backed his father from the start with both friendship and finances. One of the few men in the Dondrino whom Rawhide had fully trusted and believed in. . . . But first Renner wanted to wander about and smoke his after-supper cigar and do some more thinking.

In the evening lamps blossomed golden and flares flickered

red along Front Street, the traffic of riders and wagons raised dust, and people tramped the boardwalks beneath overhanging awnings. The hitch-racks were lined with restless or drowsing ponies, and Renner noticed new brands among the old familiar ones. The stores, saloons and gambling halls, some strange and others remembered, swarmed with motley crowds in the smoke-hazed lamplight. Cowboys, ranchers and a few farmers from the plains, with prospectors, woodsmen and hunters from the hills. Freighters and drifters, gamblers and townspeople, an occasional Indian or half-breed.

Here and there Renner saw folks he knew, but passed unrecognized himself. He had grown and changed considerably in seven years, and Brandvil had forgotten the existence of Rawhide Renner's no-account son. Which was just as well, for his purposes.

The blonde Cynthia must have been involved in Rawhide's death, Renner thought. For all of Rawhide's magnetism, it wasn't logical that such a beautiful young woman would marry a man of his age for love. She had wanted his money, of course, and she'd probably inherited everything. She and Dake Tirone were working together most likely. It was an inevitable assumption, although Renner had found them both likable enough in the stagecoach.

There were others to be considered and investigated, however. A man as powerful and ruthless as Rawhide Renner invariably made a lot of enemies. Sheriff Sullers, for instance, had always stood against Rawhide—in so far as he dared. And Sullers was no more honest than most ambitious politicians.

There was Black Jack Herne, who controlled the gambling and dance hall interests in Brandvil, along with the better saloons. He operated the Crystal Castle on the western outskirts, and employed professional gunfighters for protection. Herne had hated Rawhide, but his fear had been stronger than his hatred in the old days. Herne might have grown bolder, though, as Rawhide aged. . . . He would bear observation, at any rate.

And there were others, many of them. Ranchers like Ivy Wingate of the Running W and Detwiler of Doubloon. Busi-

nessmen like Lute Kemper and Clyde Voorhees in town. . . . The enemies of Rawhide Renner were legion, yet it was difficult for Martin to picture any of them killing his father—even from ambush. And making it appear so much like suicide that even Guy Ormond was convinced.

Martin Renner was going to run down the one, or ones, who had put the old man under. It gave him an objective, shaped and pointed his existence toward a definite goal, and that's what he needed. At sixteen he hadn't been man enough to avenge his brother Doak, but ten years later he was ready to exact payment for the death of his father. . . . I never did anything for you in life, Dad, he thought. You wouldn't let me. The least I can do now is get the man, or the outfit, that killed you.

Renner had walked the length of the business district on one side of Front. Crossing over he strolled back toward the central square, in which freight wagons, buckboards and buggies were ranked about the large stone horse trough. The old Alhambra was booming as usual, and he'd drop in later for a drink. Renner thought of Spanish, and wondered how he was going to get himself a horse. He had expected to take his pick from the Mill Iron stable, but that was out now. He hoped young Shelby was still sleeping in the room.

He ought to look up Guy Ormond, but he hesitated to make his presence known immediately. Renner had no more desire to see the big stone house on the northeastern edge of the community, with Cynthia living in luxury there, than he had to visit the home ranch with Dake Tirone in control. Eventually he'd have to go to both places, but not tonight. And something kept him from venturing toward the house Emily Hale had lived in with her family. She was surely married and settled in a home of her own by this time, and they might have trouble in recognizing one another if they should meet. He'd better forget about her. That was lost and gone, with so many other things.

Recrossing to the Brock House, Renner turned into the driveway at the side and walked back to the yard and corrals, stable and sheds of the livery. It was here that Wolf Leiken had shot Doak, and Martin Renner, standing in this spot that he had seen in so many haunted dreams and memories,

felt none of the old horror and grief, nothing but a vacant numbness. Then, leaning on the rails and watching the moon rise above the high Taloncillo ramparts in the east, he was lonelier than he had ever been in any of the faraway and foreign places.

III

IN the Alhambra Saloon, Renner nursed a drink at the long bar and listened to the babble of voices in the smoky air about him. Talk of cattle and horses, a gold strike in the Caprocks to the west, rustling in the Sandstone Hills on the south, the girls at Herne's Crystal Castle, the coming of a railroad line. Men waxed bitter about the Panic of 1873, which was still felt throughout the nation, and the corruption of the Grant administration in Washington. There was mention of Carnegie Steel and Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company in the East, and discussion concerning the new Colt .45s and Winchester .44-40s. . . . Renner listened in vain for some reference to Mill Iron, Dake Tirone and Cynthia Renner.

He was surprised to see little Benny Blue in a white apron, working behind the bar some distance away, and he wondered what had converted Benny from a bronc twister to a bartender until he noticed the pronounced limp. Gray-haired, wizened, jut-jawed Benny had been a casual ally and adviser to Mart Renner in boyhood, his perpetual gargoye scowl masking a philosopher's mind and a kind, generous nature. Now Benny squinted thoughtfully at him a couple of times, without any sign of recognition, yet Renner felt that the wry tough little man knew him at once.

It was good to see Benny Blue again, and Renner looked forward to talking with him in private. Benny could tell him as much as anyone about Rawhide's death and the whole situation here.

Laughter erupted in midroom, and the sounds of a scuffling commotion. A nearby customer said, "Them Mill Iron gunnies plaguin' that poor drunk kid again." Another

chimed in, "Yeah, they oughta have a gun barrel bent over their heads." And a third voice, "If young Shelby was sober he'd take care of 'em, and don't forget it. But the kid's blind drunk."

Renner wheeled to see what was going on. Shelby, far gone in drink, had started for the door when the two Mill Iron hands crowded him in between them. Pat Mulcahy, broad and red-faced, shouldered the boy roughly to one side. Cactus Prager, wiry and wicked-eyed, caught Shelby and shoved him back at Mulcahy.

Renner had supposed Shelby was safely asleep for the night. If he'd left the bottle out, maybe the boy would have stayed in the room. But how can you be certain of the proper way to handle a drunk? Renner might have been tempted to let the kid take his medicine, but he didn't like those two Mill Iron men, or the vicious way in which they were abusing the boy. Mulcahy and Prager were natural bullies, with an insolent swagger about them, and they had roughed Renner up in his youth. Now they set his muscles to twitching and made his knuckles itch. As much as Renner disliked becoming conspicuous at this time, he knew he couldn't stay out of this, unless they turned Shelby loose or somebody else pried them off the kid.

Shelby swung wildly at Mulcahy, and the squat man slugged him in the face. Reeling backward, the boy groped for his holster. Prager clipped him across the back of the neck, driving him forward in an erratic stumble. Mulcahy clubbed him with a brutal fist, dropping Shelby flat in the dirty sawdust. Prager was ready to give him the boot when Martin Renner stepped out from the bar and spoke with quiet intensity: "That's far enough. Leave the kid alone!"

They whirled toward him, and Cactus Prager said, with a downturned sneer baring his buck teeth, "Who the hell's this honyonker?" And Pat Mulcahy snarled, "What you hornin' in here for, brother? You want some of the same?"

"Two grown men on a drunken kid," Renner said mildly, shaking his head in reproach.

Prager grinned. "You're growed and sober. Deal yourself in."

"Just leave the boy alone."

Mulcahy laughed. "You got a big mouth, brother. Back it up with that gun you're packin'."

"I don't want any gunplay," protested Renner.

"Shut up then and breeze outa herel" Prager said, kicking at Shelby's slender slumped form on the floor.

Renner lunged forward and lashed out at Mulcahy, the nearest, before he could move a hand, landing solidly and lifting the stocky man backward across chairs and a table. Patrons sprang clear and Mulcahy went down on the back of his head, with a splintered jangling crash of woodwork and glassware. Prager's gun was half-drawn when Renner spun and struck with his left, smashing him all the way back against the wall. Renner followed on the jump and Prager, crumpled and drooping on the wall, was still trying to draw as Renner's right ripped into his narrow twisted features. Prager's head bounced off the planks with a crunching thud, and he pitched forward and floundered full length under a table, which overturned, spilling bottles and glasses.

A warning shout brought Renner around to face Mulcahy, who had climbed out of the wreckage and was coming in a bull-like rush. Renner hit him, left and right, jarring the man to a standstill and straightening him up, erect and rigid. Renner let go with another left, feeling the impact clear to his shoulder, and Mulcahy landed on his back, legs in the air, and slid against the foot of the bar, upsetting a brass cuspidor there.

Swinging back toward the entrance again, Renner saw Cactus Prager crawling out of the debris with a jagged broken bottle in his grasp. Moving in fast Martin hooked Prager with a savage left, as he started up off his knees, and flung him rolling in the sawdust against the baseboard. Dropping the bottleneck Prager scrambled onto all fours and grabbed at his gun, but Mart Renner drove his knee into that bloody snarling face with crushing force. Neck snapped and skull ground against the wall, Prager collapsed into a slack sprawl.

Pat Mulcahy was coming up again, as Renner swiveled in that direction, and this time there was a Colt in Pat's

huge paw. Frozen in his tracks, too late to draw, Renner watched Mulcahy come crouching onward like some squat beast, blood streaming down his heavy florid features.

"I'm goin' to beat your brains down between your ears, brother, and then I'm goin' to shoot the guts outa you!" Mulcahy panted, mouth drooling red.

A hushed tension filled the room, until a rasping voice from the bar broke it: "You ain't doin' nothin' of the kind, Pat! Leather that iron before I let go with both barrels!" It was little Benny Blue, of course, with a sawed-off shotgun leveled across the counter.

Pat Mulcahy turned slowly and gazed into the twin muzzles of that Greener. Swearing and spitting blood, he holstered his six-gun. "You're crazy, Benny, throwin' down on Mill Iron. You oughta know that ain't healthy."

"Mill Iron or nobody else is doin' murder in here," Benny Blue told him. "Get out, Pat, and drag Cactus along with you. Take your trade somewhere else. You boys caused enough ruckus here for one night."

Cactus Prager was getting up slowly, swaying and holding one hand to his crimsoned dripping jaw, the other on the wall for support. "You're goin' to be—plenty sorry for this, Benny," he mumbled, and nodded at Renner. "You too—big boy."

"Why, I'm sorry right now," Renner said gravely, blinking sweat from his eyes and massaging his sore knuckles.

"You ain't, but you sure as hell will be, stranger," growled Pat Mulcahy. "Ranahans like you don't last long in this country, brother."

"Get goin', you two, move out." Benny Blue waved his scattergun impatiently, and the Mill Iron pair blundered groggily out through the batwing doors.

Renner bent and lifted Shelby in his arms, smelling the reek of whiskey and sweat and trampled sawdust. Benny Blue put down the shotgun, took off his apron, and came out from behind the bar. "Upstairs to my room. I'm knockin' off work, and I'll show you the way."

In the room at the rear of the second-floor corridor, Renner deposited Shelby on the bed and held out his hand to

the small wrinkled bartender. "Obliged, Benny. Hope it don't get you in trouble."

Blue gripped his hand and snorted. "Trouble's bread and butter to me, boy. I thrive on it. Thought you looked familiar when you first came in. Second glance and I knew you was Marty Renner. Welcome back, son. You've growed up considerable. Too bad old Rawhide couldn't of seen you go down there tonight."

"You look about the same, Benny," said Renner. "Still wearing that sunny smile and all."

"Hell, I'm all crippled up and old enough to die, Mart." He scowled even more ferociously. "Probably would if I wasn't too confounded ornery to bother goin' through with a funeral and the buryin'. . . . You heard about your dad?"

"Not much. Just that he's dead. And they call it suicide."

Benny Blue snorted. "Ain't that somethin'? Suicidel! An old grizzly bear like Rawhide!" Cursing with rare originality, Benny indicated a whiskey bottle on the stand, poured water from a pitcher into a washbowl, and set to bathing young Shelby's head and face. "This kid's had a bad run of it lately, Mart. Folks owned a little spread up on the north tablelands. Somebody shot the old man, run off all the stock, and the mother died soon after. Shelby's been mostly drunk ever since."

"Lots of rustling here, Benny?"

"Some. The small spreads are sufferin' most. I figure the big ones are doin' it, but they claim it's a gang from outside."

Martin Renner took a swig from the bottle, and lit another cigar. "Who do you think got my father, Benny?"

Benny Blue shook his head, his hair nearly white now, his scarred seamed leathery face solemn. "There's a lot of theories, all kinds of 'em, Mart. Too damn many possibilities for me. Offhand I'd guess that Black Jack Herne hired it done. He never forgave Rawhide for havin' that red-light district closed and all them cribs torn down."

"What about the young widow—and Dake Tirone?"

"I don't know, son. They seem to be on the level and in the clear. Rawhide thought a lot of Tirone, had him runnin' Mill Iron two-three years before he died. And the gal—well,

there's a lot of talk about her. Always is when a pretty young woman marries an old man—although your dad never got real old. But she was mighty nice to Rawhide, made him a real good wife. Cynthia strikes me as quite a sound sensible gal. Course it's always hard to tell for sure about female critters."

"Where'd they find him?"

Benny paused in his ministrations for a gulp of whiskey. "Out between Sangaree Swamp and the Little Don crossin'. Dead on the ground, his gun beside him, horse standin' by. One shot fired from the gun, close enough to burn his shirt."

"It really looked like suicide then?"

"Sure—but it wasn't," Benny Blue said. "Here's somethin' most people don't know, or won't admit to knowin'. Rawhide wasn't killed with the six-gun they found there—his own forty-four. That was fired after, at close range, into the bullet hole that done the job. Rawhide was killed at long range with a high-powered rifle, I figure."

"You're sure about that?"

"Doc Seabrey told me, Mart. We're the only ones that know it, outside of them in on the killin'."

"Couldn't you do anything about it?"

Benny gestured disgustedly. "What can you do with a sheriff like Abe Sullers? Doc and me tried to get a U.S. marshal in, but he ain't showed yet."

"You think it was a buffalo gun maybe?" mused Renner.

"Probably, Mart. One of them big old Sharps, like Rawhide had."

Renner smiled thinly. "This afternoon in Red Gap I had a horse killed under me, Benny. It sounded like one of those big-bore Sharps, and the hole looked like it."

"Anybody know you was comin', Marty?"

"Not that I know of, Ben. You got any leads for me?"

Benny dipped the towel again and went on sponging Shelby's face. "I think old Sam Derry knows somethin' about it. But he's too scared to talk to anybody lately. You remember old Sam, the gunsmith?"

Renner nodded. "I'll try him anyway. What does Guy Ormond think about it?"

"Nobody rightly knows, Mart," said Benny Blue. "Guy

took it awful hard, and just shut up tight. Don't want any talkin' about it at all. He's administrator of the estate naturally. It all went to the widow, but Guy and Tirone are helpin' out with her affairs."

"Those three, then, benefited most from my father's death?"

"Them two, Cynthia and Tirone, you mean," corrected Benny. "Guy's got enough of his own, Marty. He wouldn't take anythin' of Rawhide's. You know Guy Ormond—square and solid as a brick. I never had much use for bankers myself, but I got to hand it to Guy Ormond. And that's why I figure Cynthia and Dake are all right, because Guy seems to think so. . . . Pass the bottle, son. All this talkin' makes me dry."

"Guy was Dad's best friend," Renner said. "They were about as close as two men can be."

"Where was you, Mart, when you heard Rawhide was dead?" inquired Benny Blue. "Reckon that's what brung you back to the Dondrino?"

Copper-red strands glinted in Renner's cropped hair, as he moved his head negatively in the lamplight. "Didn't know a thing about it until I got here this afternoon, Ben. A deal went wrong down in Mexico, and I was tired of ramming around loose anyway. It came to me that I ought to see the old man once more, so I headed home—too late."

"Yeah, we're always too late when we try to do somethin' good and right, somethin' we ought to do." Benny smiled with sorrowful irony. "Now why is it a man's never too late for a good drunk or a bad woman or a barroom brawl?"

Renner laughed softly, then sobered almost instantly. "There was more than one man in on the kill, Benny. Anything else I ought to know?"

"Well, Wolf Leiken's been around town some, Mart. But not till after your dad was shot. The Wolf might of wanted Rawhide dead, but I doubt if he'd done it that way."

"He might have though," Renner said, bitterness welling up at the mention of that name. "He wasn't too anxious to stand up against Rawhide before. He pulled out quick after—after he killed Doak. What's Leiken doing back here, Ben?"

"Just hangin' around, seems like. The Castle mostly, but

I haven't heard he was on Herne's payroll. Some folks think he's headin' the rustlers hereabouts."

"Who else has Jack Herne got?"

"Mule Garay and Pine Elgart and Spider Webley are his top gunhands. Had another named Hilliard, but he got himself killed," Benny Blue said, tilting the bottle again.

"Any one of them would do murder. For a price, or the fun of it."

"They would, Mart, for sure. But they most generally like to do their gunnin' face to face, in public. Them three boys got reputations to uphold and build onto. They want full credit when they burn a man down. . . . Now you need any money or anythin', son?"

"I might want to borrow a horse, Ben. Maybe a little money, too."

"I got both," Benny Blue declared. "Two good bronses from my Mill Iron string over in the livery barn. And since I get my drinkin' liquor free on this job, I got more money than I ever had before, Marty."

"I don't need any right away, but I'm glad to hear you've got it," Renner said, taking a short drink of the whiskey.

"If I ain't got enough, Guy Ormond will stake you to all you want."

"Guess I'll call on old Sam Derry first."

"Well, be careful, son," said Benny Blue. "Somebody must of heard you was on your way home, if they started shootin' at you out in the pass. And Brandvil ain't apt to be too healthy a town for you, Mart."

"Or for some other folks either," Martin Renner said quietly.

"Don't go chargin' the Castle all by yourself now. I allow you've most likely learned to handle a gun pretty good while you been skyhootin' around the country, but some odds are too big for any man to buck alone."

"I might get out there later, Ben. A peaceful visit."

"The kid here's comin' around before long, I reckon," Benny Blue said. "Maybe we'll see you in that fancy sink-hole of sin and iniquity."

IV

RENNER turned south from the square and walked toward the Dondrino River, the night sounds of Front Street fading behind him, the laughter of saloons and the music of honky-tonks. Hoofs chopped the soft dirt, and wheels turned on groaning axles. Lights glowed from the windows of homes in this section, and children shouted at play and a mother called urgently for her young ones. Dogs set up a barking somewhere, and the high wavering cry of coyotes answered in the distance. Renner had walked these streets with Emily Hale, and seen beauty in everything about them. Now it was just another shabby barren frontier settlement. The magic was gone with the years. He walked alone, feeling old and dull, with a nameless pain and hunger turning inside him.

The Hale house was before him, its curtained windows warm amber rectangles in the darkness, and Martin Renner hesitated in front of the cozy homelike cottage. No, he had too much to do. Most of it with a gun, all of it bad . . . Renner went on with resolute strides. He had deserted the girl he was pledged to marry once, and she wouldn't care to see him again. It would only open old wounds, bring no pleasure to either of them. The pain and longing sharpened in Renner, but he walked on toward the river. A tall lonely figure moving with the stilted grace of a rider, the sheathed .44 Colt sagging on his right thigh.

Old Sam Derry occupied bachelor quarters behind his gunshop, an ancient log-and-frame structure near the river bluff. In boyhood Renner had spent many pleasant hours here, fascinated by guns even though he was slow in learning to use them, according to the standards of his father and the Dondrino.

Sam opened the back door narrowly, in response to Renner's rap, and peered out into the night. He had changed, aged shockingly. Lamplight varnished his bald head, and fear made a caricature of his sunken withered features and drooping jowls. "Who is it?" he demanded fretfully. "Shop's closed and I don't entertain company."

"I've got to see you for a minute, Sam," said Renner.

"Don't know you, young man. Who are you?" He was so abjectly frightened that Renner pitied the old-timer. In the old days Sam had held his head up and looked any man in the eye.

"Marty Renner—Rawhide's son. You remember me, Sam."

"No, *no!*" The old man tried to slam the door shut, but Renner inserted his boot and forced it open, gently but firmly, until he was inside with Sam Derry faltering in retreat before him.

"Why'd you come back here?" wailed the gunsmith. "This town's no good for you, boy. What brings you to my place? Anybody see you coming here?"

"Nobody even knows I'm in Brandvil," said Renner reassuringly. "Take it easy, Sam. I'm your friend. There's nothing to be scared of."

Derry cackled mirthlessly. "That's what you think! This town's gone stinking rotten since old Rawhide went under. You won't last overnight here, Martin."

"Sam, you and Rawhide were always close. What can you tell me about my father's death?"

"Nothing, boy. Not a single solitary damn thing. Don't know nothing about it, and don't want to know."

"You know all the guns in the Dondrino, Sam," persisted Renner. "Who's got an old Sharps fifty-six or -eight?"

"Ain't none of 'em left, that I know of. Don't use 'em since the buffalo went and the repeaters come in." Sam Derry sank into a homemade barrel chair, and gestured weakly for Renner to take the leather one. The dingy room was cluttered and musty in the faint lamplight, smelling of age and fear and mold, the windows closely curtained. Recalling the clean oiled-steel odor of the shop out front, the keen eyes and deft fingers and colorful rollicking stories of a younger Sam Derry, Renner was wistful and saddened.

"Think hard, Sam," he said gently. "Someone's still using a buffalo gun around here."

"Your father had a fifty-six. A fine old weapon."

"I remember that. Who else, Sam?"

"Nobody, boy, nobody. They all got repeaters nowadays.

Go on away now, Martin, and let an old man get his sleep—if sleep'll come."

Renner studied the cigarette he was shaping. "You won't sleep good, Sam. You've got too much on your mind. Spill some of it and you'll rest easier. Rawhide always treated you right, Sam. You owe something to him."

"He's in his grave, boy. You can't raise the dead. And you'll be in yours, if you don't get out of this valley. Get out and leave me be."

"Who killed him, Sam?"

"How in tarnation would I know? They claim he killed himself."

Renner smiled slowly. "We know better'n that, Sam. If you had a guess, who would you say?"

Sam Derry shook a knotted, veined claw of a hand at his visitor, his scrawny corded throat working painfully. "Hell-fire and damnation, son, you can guess as good as anybody! You know who runs the rotten end of Brandvil, who hated your dad's guts and had the hired killers to do the dirty work. You know as well as I do, Mart. Why pester me?"

"Black Jack Herne?"

"I ain't naming no names. I ain't saying a word. Will you please get out of here, Martin? And out of town and the whole damn Dondrino, if you got the brains you was born with, boy."

"All right, Sam. Sorry if I upset you, but don't worry too much."

"Worry?" Sam sighed and wagged his bald head. "If things was different, son . . . I—I miss Rawhide as much as anybody. A great man. They don't make no more like him."

"A good shot, wasn't he?" Renner wanted to keep him talking.

"Good? They don't come no better, with a handgun or a saddle gun. Why, just a few years back in the early Seventies he went out buffalo hunting with some of the best in the business, young sprigs like Wyatt Earp and Billy Tilghman and Johnny Poe, Charlie Bassett and Bat Masterson. Down on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas, and old Rawhide could shoot with any of them . . ." Sam Derry sighed again,

and the brief light died out in his eyes and face. "But that don't keep a man alive forever. You better go now, Marty. I'm old and I'm sick and I want to be alone."

Renner rose with a kindly smile. "You'll get better, Sam. There's going to be some changes here."

"They're too many for you, son." Sam Derry stood up shakily. "You'll end up like Rawhide did, if you try to buck 'em."

"They took him by surprise, Sam. I know what I'm up against. Don't be afraid any more. Everything's going to be all right here. Good night, Sam."

"Watch yourself, Mart," quavered the gunsmith. "Look for a gun at every corner. They'll be out after you, when they hear you're back." He shut and bolted the door hastily, after Renner had stepped outside.

The moon sailed high and serene over the Taloncillo Mountains, gilding the lofty peaks and domes, and the cottonwoods and willows along the silvered Dondrino glistened in the moonbeams. Beyond the river deep in the south rolled the Sandstone Hills, and far off in the west reared the serrated barrier of the Caprock Range. The fragrance of new grass, leaves and sage came to Renner as he sauntered back toward the center of the community, and Cherokee roses were blooming in some of the dooryards.

He had learned nothing from Sam Derry, but he might get something from that source later. Poor old Sam was scared almost witless. Renner felt positive that Sam knew who owned the high-calibered Sharps that had killed his father—and his horse. That's what filled the veteran gunsmith with such mortal terror. It was dangerous knowledge to possess, and it had turned Sam Derry's existence into a perpetual nightmare. Renner wanted to help and protect the old-timer. The only way he could do so was to run down the killers. He'd start with Black Jack Herne and his bodyguards. Even if they weren't guilty, in this particular case, the Dondrino would be a far better country without them.

The close hot suction of lead seared past Renner's cheek, as flame speared blindingly at him from an alley across the street to his right, and a loud report blasted the night's stillness and echoed among the buildings. Pivoting and drawing

with smooth instinctive speed, Renner threw a shot at the fading muzzle flash.

Boots crunched in rapid receding flight through that dark passage, as Renner crossed to the mouth of it and stopped momentarily at the corner of the darkened house. The man kept running and Renner took after him, gun in hand. But when he cleared the rear end of the alley, the untidy back lots were empty and silent. Renner waited, eyes and ears keened, but nothing stirred and no sound reached him. There was little sense in plunging into that littered black labyrinth of sheds, outhouses, rubbish heaps and fences.

Swearing softly and replacing his spent shell, Renner returned to the street and paced on toward the garish lights of the business district. Heads popped from doors and windows, and hoarse anxious voices called questioningly from house to house, but Renner ignored them and strode on his way.

This was what he had to expect then—shots from unknown snipers in ambush, or slugs in the back from every alley he passed. Sam Derry's prophecy about his not lasting overnight might very well come true. He couldn't fight something he couldn't see. It left Renner with a baffled helpless sensation, mixed with his cold hard anger.

A block away from Front Street, a neat, trim, dark-clothed man stepped out into Renner's path, and Mart's Colt was half drawn again before he recognized Abel Sullers, the sheriff.

"What's all the shooting about?" the lawman asked coolly, white teeth showing beneath his black mustache.

"Somebody took a shot at me back there," Renner said, "and I returned the favor. We both missed."

"You seem to have brought a lot of trouble to town with you," Sullers said. "What's your name, mister?"

"Martin."

Abel Sullers scrutinized him with a shrewd smile. "Martin Renner, isn't it?"

"All right, Abe. I guess you've got me tagged."

"If you don't want to be recognized you ought to keep out of saloon fights—and shooting scrapes. What are you back here for?"

"Just wanted to see the place again. And my father."

"You didn't know Rawhide was dead?" The sheriff's tone was frankly disbelieving.

"Not until I got to Brandvil," said Renner.

Sullers fingered his mustache. "You shouldn't have come, Marty. The estate's all settled, there's nothing for you here. Take my advice and get out of town—tonight."

"Can't do that, Abe. My horse was shot in the pass today. And I've got a room in the Brock House. Besides, I want to find out who's shooting at me—and why. I've done nothing to be ordered out of town for."

"Got any idea who fired at you just now?"

"Not unless it was Mulcahy or Prager."

Sullers laughed unpleasantly. "They may try it, but not that way. They're good enough so they don't have to bush-whack a man. Wolf Leiken's around, but he wouldn't take you like that either. . . . I'm afraid a lot of people'll be shooting at you, Mart. Which is why I want you out of town—for your own good."

"But why are they after me?" asked Renner.

"I can't answer riddles. I can only say it's been real nice and peaceful here—until you came home. If you won't pull out, I'll have to lock you up, Martin. For your own safety."

Renner smiled and shook his head. "You aren't locking me up, Abe. Don't get any such notion."

Sullers glared, openly hostile now. "Your father was a big man in this country. He ran things to suit himself. Your brother Doak was high and mighty like the old man. He got away with murder here, too. You were kind of quiet and decent as a kid, but I can see the difference in you now. You've come back here to tree this town, like your dad and brother did. . . . But Rawhide is dead."

"And you're glad, Abe?" said Renner, with soft malice.

"It don't make me glad to see any man die," Sullers said. "Big or little, good or bad. But you Renners are all through hurrahing Brandvil, understand?"

Martin Renner laughed. "Wait till I do something before you jump me, Abe. So far all I've done is get shot at twice, and stop a couple of Mill Iron men from beating up a drunk kid."

"If you had a grain of sense you'd get out of here," Sullers said. "If you're bullheaded enough to stay and get killed, don't blame me. But tread slow and easy while you're here, Mart, or you'll land in jail. Since Rawhide died the law applies to Renner the same as anybody else. You—"

A brisk stomp of boots interrupted him, and they both turned to watch the approach of a tall straight man in a frock coat and striped trousers. Guy Ormond, as handsome and distinguished as ever, with his high gray head and well-trimmed gray beard. A figure of imposing dignity and regal authority.

"What's going on here, Abel?" he asked jovially. "Did I hear gunplay, or was it just some inebriate letting off surplus steam?" Then he showed surprise and delight, as he recognized Renner. "Why, Marty! How are you, my boy? Were you involved in that shooting?"

"Hello, Guy," said Renner, shaking hands with him. "Somebody tried to pot me from an alley, and Abe wants to put me in jail for it."

Guy Ormond laughed heartily and clapped Renner on the shoulder. "A great pleasure to see you, Marty. Just taking my evening constitutional. Come back to the office, Martin. I have something better than you'll find in the local *bistros*. Perhaps you'll join us in a reunion drink, Abel?"

"No, thanks, Guy," said Sullers. "I'll leave Mart in your hands. I was just warning him about the danger he seems to be in here. Within a few hours, he's been shot at twice, besides being mixed up in a saloon fracas. Looks like Brandvil's a bad place for him to be, Guy."

"I'll take care of the young man," Ormond assured the sheriff. "I doubt if anyone will fire at him in my company."

"All right, Guy," muttered Sullers. "But I still think he ought to get out of town—while he can." He slanted across the street, and the other two made for the brick bank building near the square.

"Glad you came along, Guy," said Renner, feeling comfortable and secure as he always had with this old friend of the family. "Abe was bent on running me out or locking me up."

Ormond laughed easily, as they matched strides on the

boardwalk. "He won't do either, of course. It's certainly wonderful to see you after all these years, Marty. You've grown big and tall, filled out and developed remarkably, matured all around. Can't tell you how pleased I was when I heard you were here."

"Didn't think anybody had spotted me, except Benny Blue."

"Oh, yes, you were recognized by several citizens. I imagine that scuffle in the Alhambra is what gave your identity away, my boy." Ormond unlocked his private entrance at the rear of the bank, and lighted the desk lamp. "Nothing's the same since Rawhide went, Martin. I've been a very lonely man." He got out bottle and glasses, and poured the drinks.

Neither Guy Ormond nor this elegant office showed the ravages of time, yet Renner sensed some subtle change in the man. Ormond was every inch the aristocratic gentleman, but there was warmth, understanding and kindness in him too. If a difference actually existed in him, Renner could not define it. The slight restraint between them was natural after a long separation. The banker inquired about his travels, and Renner replied with brief simplicity.

"There's nothing I'd like better, Martin, than to have you settle down here," Guy Ormond said, in his grave well-modulated voice. "But I'm afraid the sheriff is right, to a certain extent. Your father had many enemies, as you know. Men who were envious of his power and success. Apparently they are transferring their hatred to you, which means that your own life isn't safe in Brandvil."

"I don't intend to stay here too long," Renner said. "But there's a few things I want to find out here. And I'm not going to be driven away until I do."

"Naturally, my boy," agreed Ormond. "You have a perfect right to be curious. About the will now—your father cut you out when you ran away from home. You no doubt expected as much?"

"Sure, I asked for that. Couldn't very well expect anything else. But it's not the estate, Guy. It's—"

Guy Ormond went on, overriding Renner's attempted explanation: "Cynthia Renner is a generous lady, however, and

from the first she has wanted to grant you a fair settlement—providing you could be located.”

“She don’t have to do that.”

“She is determined to, Martin, and I believe it’s only fair and just. It will give you enough capital to start a business of your own, or to live and travel about in comfort. Perhaps in moderate luxury.”

“Well, we’ll see about that later, Guy,” said Renner.

“As you wish, my boy. I merely wanted to make it clear that you were not being left absolutely penniless, as you may have thought. Now what is it you propose to do first, Marty?”

“Find out who murdered my father,” Renner said bluntly.

Guy Ormond looked mildly shocked. “You’re sure it was murder then? I’ve had the same feeling myself, at times, but all the evidence indicated suicide. It’s difficult to believe that a man like Rawhide would destroy himself, but I don’t know . . . It has caused me many sleepless nights, Martin, and many miserable days.”

“I know he didn’t kill himself, Guy.”

“If it were murder, it’s two years old. And what can one man, or two, do against a horde of professional gunfighters?”

“I don’t know—yet, Guy. But I’m going to do something.”

“Revenge *was* the motive behind your return, I gather.”

Renner smiled somberly. “Not quite. I thought Rawhide was alive, until I got to Brandvil.”

“Ah, I see,” murmured Ormond, his austere bearded countenance mirroring some of the same incredulity that Sullers had shown. “It won’t help Rawhide to throw your own life away, Martin. I cannot honestly support any such lawless enterprise either.”

“You don’t have to, Guy. I’m doing it on my own. The way it should be, and the way I want it.”

“It’s a regrettable course, my boy.”

“Maybe so,” Renner said. “But it’s the only one I can see.”

Ormond inclined his noble gray head sorrowfully, then smiled with all his charm and cheer. “Well, we may as well have another drink.”

“I’ve got to be going, Guy. Got a lot of things to do, before too many folks find out I’m here.”

"I trust you won't be too rash, Martin. Is there anything I can do? Have you sufficient money?"

Renner grinned ruefully. "You might lend me fifty, Guy."

Ormond produced his wallet and counted out five tens. "Will that be enough, Marty? I can advance you any amount within reason. Cynthia will be generous in her settlement, I'm sure."

"This is all I need right now," Renner said. "Thanks for everything, Guy. And I'll see you tomorrow—if all goes well."

Ormond rose with him. "Be as careful as possible, son. You're going against tremendous odds, you know."

Renner held out his hand. "I got used to being on the short end these last seven years, Guy."

After he had departed, Guy Ormond poured himself another drink and sank back into his chair with a weary sigh. For a long time he sat motionless there, staring at the glass in his fine-shaped hand with remote unseeing eyes.

Outside, Martin Renner realized for the first time how bone-tired he was, and a feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction spread through his weariness. Everyone thought he had come back here to muscle into Rawhide Renner's fortune, and everybody but Benny Blue wanted to get him out of town at once. Even Guy Ormond, his father's best friend and partner.

But something stronger than himself made Martin Renner resolve to stay and see this show through to the bitter bloody end, regardless of who got hurt or killed on the way.

He was too exhausted to carry on any more tonight though. He met little Benny Blue limping out of the Brock House, and Benny said, "I just put the kid to bed upstairs in your room, Mart. He'll be all right tomorrow, but he ain't fit for anythin' but slumber tonight."

"Neither am I, Ben," said Renner. "I'm going to turn in and sleep as long as I can."

"Good idea," Benny agreed. "See you boys around tomorrow, or tomorrow night anyway. You get anythin' from Sam?"

"Not much. He's scared to death. But I got shot at again, after I left him."

Benny Blue grunted and spat tobacco juice. "You'll have to get used to that, Mart. You're goin' to get greeted mostly by guns here."

V

THE Crystal Castle, in which Black Jack Herne maintained his headquarters, was a large two-story frame building at the western edge of Brandvil. The exterior, bare and ugly, made the name seem pretentious, but the interior was rich and lavish for a frontier honkytonk. An elaborate bar, gambling room and dance hall took up the ground floor, with a stage at the opposite end from the bar. Upstairs were living quarters for Herne and his gunmen, the girls and other employees, and rooms for private parties.

A notorious emporium of pleasure, the Castle drew customers from all over the Dondrino, and even from beyond the mountains. Since the cribs of the red-light district had been demolished, the vice of the valley centered around this establishment. Enormous crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, appearing to float glitteringly on shifting seas of blue smoke. Backbar and wall mirrors reflected the merriment, and polished brass fixtures gleamed under the lights. Between the mirrored surfaces of the walls were voluptuous paintings of nude women, executed with striking realism.

Despite its expensive if gaudy trappings, the Castle catered to clients from all walks and levels of life. There were drinks and games and girls that the poorest-paid cowhands could afford on their night in town, and there were others which taxed the means of the most prosperous ranchers, merchants and gamblers. Jack Herne stayed behind the scenes in his office for the most part, but housemen were everywhere about the premises. Lookouts on high stools watched over the gambling tables, with sawed-off shotguns across their knees. Men like Elgart and Garay and Webley, each wearing two low-slung pistols, circulated around the barroom and dance floor. There was seldom any disturbance in the Crystal Castle. At wide intervals somebody might get beaten up and thrown out. On even rarer occasions men were shot

down. An outsider didn't have a chance in the world here. It was always self-defense when Herne's gunnies blasted one of them.

Rawhide Renner had tried to put Herne out of business and drive him out of town, but the most he could accomplish was wiping out the blatant evil of the cribs that Black Jack operated in a solid two-acre section on the perimeter of the settlement. . . .

Except for her flame-colored gown, low-cut on a firm white bosom, the woman in a doorway off the dance floor did not look as if she belonged in this setting. Black hair with a natural wave framed a fine face, in which strength and delicacy were blended. The brown eyes, set at a slight exotic slant above prominent cheekbones, were flecked with golden lights. Her nose was straight and strong, too large for beauty, and her mouth was wide and full above the clean chin. She had a melancholy look about her. There was grace in the way she stood at ease, the flowing curves of her figure giving a sense of ripe feminine depth, for all her slenderness.

And she didn't feel like a part of this, never had and never would—she hoped. Another night of it, Emily thought. I wonder what keeps me from going insane?

Martin Renner was back in Brandvil, and she didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. He had arrived late yesterday afternoon on the stage, after having his horse shot from under him in Red Gap. Last night he'd been in a fight in the Alhambra, she heard, and later another attempt had been made on his life. He'd grown big and tough, they said, but no one man was big and tough enough to face all the evil elements in the Dondrino.

She remembered Martin as a nice lanky boy, with coppery-brown hair that would have curled if he hadn't kept it cut so short. Eyes that changed from clear gray to a bitter green, and a sweet shy smile. Without the big arrogant swagger of Rawhide and Doak in those days, but he must have developed that by this time, if what they said about him was true. It was hard to picture that quiet pleasant boy turned into a barroom brawler and gunfighter. But wasn't it equally hard to believe that Emily Hale had become a percentage girl in a place like this?

They had been very much in love and planning to get married, but that was a long time ago. Seven years since Martin had gone away, and for a while she'd really thought she was dying with a broken heart. And sometimes now, she wished she had. . . . Instead Tom Hilliard had come along and courted her, and Emily had married him two years ago, before she realized that Hilliard was a gay, charming, but irresponsible rakehell, who worked for Black Jack Herne. A hired gunhand.

Six months after the wedding, Tom Hilliard had been shot to death on some mysterious mission for Herne. Emily had gone home to her parents, but everything was changed and she could not stay there. For the past year or so she had been working at the Castle, a fallen woman and a disgrace to the family. But Emily could hold her head up, if her folks couldn't. She wasn't like the other girls here, regardless of what people thought. Jack Herne had made special provisions for Emily. Her duties were restricted to dancing and nothing else.

Even so, Emily hated to have Martin Renner find her in this place. And he'd be coming out here, sooner or later. She had looked for him last night.

Emily always doubted that Rawhide Renner had taken his own life. She suspected that he'd been murdered, and that Herne and his crew were mixed up in it somehow. At odd moments she was inclined to think that Hilliard had been killed by Herne's men, and that was why Black Jack treated her with such kindness and consideration. She'd probably never learn the truth about Tom Hilliard's death, but Marty Renner would certainly do everything in his power to uncover the facts concerning the death of his father. Martin would be coming to the Castle for that purpose, to check on Herne and his followers. And he'd be in great danger here.

They'd been little more than children when they fell in love, Emily supposed, but there had been nothing shallow and adolescent about it. Martin might scarcely remember her, but she'd never forget him. The first, the dearest, and the best. . . . It had been natural, inevitable and meant-to-be. They had both wanted marriage, Martin as much as she,

until suddenly he had run away, left her and his Mill Iron heritage, and never once written in all those years. . . .

Oh, Marty, Marty, how could you do it? What made you do it? . . . We had something rare and beautiful and you threw it away. Look what you've done to us, to our lives, Martin. We had so much and now we've got nothing, nothing.

Maybe it was just a kid's affair to him, Emily thought. But not to me. It went deep, it was everything to me. . . . I didn't have a thing to give poor Tom Hilliard. Tom really got cheated—and then killed.

Spider Webley hobbled up to her doorway on wide bowed legs, a small warped man with an oversized head and ugly features. "Why ain't you dancin', gal?" he asked, with a tobacco-stained grin, curiously mild and gentle for a killer of his standing. "You're too purty to be perched out here alone, Emily."

"I get tired, I guess, Spider."

"Oughta git married again, a gal like you. This is all right for them other women maybe, but it ain't for you. Wisht I was tall and handsome like the Mule."

Emily smiled faintly. "One gun fighting husband is enough, Spider."

"You're most likely right." Spider Webley tipped his hat-brim and moved on, looking sleepy and harmless but seeing everything with those slitted eyes.

Emily walked to an empty table beside the floor. A man staggered over to claim a dance, but she saw that he was too drunk and waved him away good-naturedly. "You just think you want to dance, mister." When he became loud and persistent, Pine Elgart eased alongside of him, lank and loose-jointed, and the man made an unsteady but rapid departure.

Elgart glanced down at her, his gaunt features mournful and brooding. "Young Renner may come around. We ain't goin' to know him at all. If he talks to you, discourage him from startin' any trouble." Emily nodded and Elgart loped off, towering above the crowd but thin as a rail. They treated her well. Big Mule Garay was the only one who worried her. So far she'd been able to handle him, but he was getting more

insistent and difficult. Garay fancied himself as a ladies' man, and he had wanted Emily from the beginning.

The music stopped, the floor cleared, and the orchestra leader announced a spicy French act, straight from Gay Paree. A chorus of girls came out on the stage into the harsh glare of kerosene footlights, and did the cancan with an extraordinary display of long silken legs, bright garters and lace-ruffled buttocks. Applause swelled loud and hoarse, stirring the smoke layers about the shimmering chandeliers.

Mule Garay was walking toward Emily's table then, a smiling rawboned giant, big with an over-all bigness, so well formed and co-ordinated that his great stature was evident mainly in the way he dwarfed men of normal size. He moved lightly, easily, and with utter assurance, and he was rather good-looking in a bold dark hawk-faced manner. Sliding into a chair, he made Emily and the table seem tiny and insignificant.

"I been watchin' you," Garay said. "You hate this joint, everybody and everythin' in it—except me. You don't have to go on this way, Emily. Marry me and get out of this mess."

"It wouldn't work—or last," Emily told him. "You don't really want to get married. I tried it once and it wasn't any good."

"Hilliard wasn't man enough for you. I am. I don't very often think enough of a woman to offer marriage, but with you—"

"It's a last resort. You don't have to offer it with most girls. . . . I know, Milo." She smiled dimly and shook her dark head.

"Start dancin' then," Garay said. "If you're goin' to waste your life here, you might as well work at it. I'll take the next one, to get you into the swing of it."

"Please, not yet, Milo. I don't feel well tonight."

"Why don't you go home then? You come and go as you like. Or is it that damn Renner you're waitin' to see?" When she failed to reply, Mule Garay stood up and strode off in his natural lazy swagger. A man accustomed to having his way with women as well as men, who could not understand Emily's resistance to him. Everything else having failed,

he'd be trying brute force next. . . . She'd have to get out before that happened. She felt soiled enough from casual dance-hall contacts.

Emily was dancing when she saw Wolf Leiken at the bar, and the sight made her shudder. If Martin Renner met Leiken he'd go for him, and if Marty got the Wolf some of Herne's professionals would take him in turn. Leiken was dressed neatly in a black hat and suit, white shirt and black string tie. His hair was prematurely silver, his eyes colorless, his features sharp and cold as steel. There was an icy deadliness about Wolf Leiken that none of Herne's gunmen could approximate.

Her partner, a lean boyish puncher, felt her trembling, and asked, "See a ghost, ma'am?" Then he spotted Leiken and nodded understandingly. "The Wolf, huh? He'd give 'most anybody the shakes. Used to be top killer for the Mormons up north around Salt Lake, they say. Sure hope I'm around when he and Mart Renner tangle." Then he fell abruptly silent, recalling some rumors he had heard about this girl and Renner.

After a discussion with Mule Garay and Pine Elgart, Leiken left the Castle, and Emily wondered if they had sent him in search of Marty. Ten years ago Wolf Leiken had come to Brandvil and killed Doak Renner in back of the Brock House, and many people thought the Wolf had been imported to do that job. By Black Jack Herne probably. The Wolf hadn't appeared again until after Rawhide's death. Herne might have sent for him to take care of the second and last Renner brother, in the event of Martin's return. For certain jobs Black Jack preferred to employ experts from outside the Dondrino.

About an hour later Emily was on the dance floor again when her eyes fell upon Martin Renner and her heart seemed to stop beating. He was much taller and broader, a fine-looking man with a tough reckless air, reminiscent of his dad and brother, but she would have known him anywhere. He wore a flat-crowned hat, faded blue shirt under a leather vest, and a gun belt slanted across flat dark-trousered hips.

*** When Emily's heart resumed beating it nearly burst her

ribs, and she went faint and giddy as she looked appealingly up at her partner.

"Please, you'll have to excuse me. Sorry, but I'm not well." She gave him back the dance check and fled from the hall, stumbling blindly up an inside stairway to a dressing room on the second floor.

In that perfumed feminine sanctuary, Emily collapsed panting and sobbing dryly on a divan. Martin Renner looked as big and powerful as Mule Garay, although he wasn't; as cruel and menacing as Wolf Leiken, although he couldn't be. . . . But he was one of their kind now, a man who lived by the gun. And she still loved him, and nothing else mattered.

VI

DRINK in hand, Renner turned his back to the bar and surveyed the garish splendor of the Crystal Castle. Music blared, the polished hardwood was aswirl with dancers, and the gambling layouts were crowded. Drinkers lined the great mahogany bar and ringed the tables about the huge hall. Lamplight streamed through sparkling crystals, reflected from myriad mirrors, and touched brass fixtures with golden fire. It was too flashy and loud and swarming with humanity for Renner's liking. The gaiety and laughter had a false forced note. He felt oppressed, almost smothered, in this place.

Renner wouldn't have known Herne's gunhands by sight, if Benny Blue hadn't refreshed his memory with descriptions of them. Now it was easy enough to pick them out—big Garay, lanky Elgart and the small Webley—but they seemed wholly unaware of his presence. Nobody appeared to recognize him, for which Renner was duly grateful. There was no reason why Herne's men should know him, unless they had been alerted by Black Jack on hearing that Renner was back in town. Yet Renner was uncomfortably aware of eyes fixed on his every movement. Possibly he was being watched through peepholes in the walls. It would be like Herne to use such devices. If Renner's identity was known, death

hovered at his shoulder, but he doubted if Herne would want him killed openly in public. At least not until Jack was certain that Renner was after him.

Wandering casually about, Renner came face to face with one after another of the gunmen, but none of them paid the slightest attention to him in the milling throngs. He was just another anonymous sucker, come to pour his hard-earned money into the overflowing cash drawers of Black Jack Herne.

Returning to the bar, Renner bought a bottle of whiskey and carried it with two glasses to a small empty table in an obscure corner off the dance floor. Maybe he could learn something from talking to one of these women. He had felt the glances of several girls on him, and caught a spark of interest in them. It was not egotism. Renner knew he attracted some women and left others cold and indifferent. He had never taken undue pride in the one or suffered any disappointment over the other. Except with Emily Hale, it hadn't mattered one way or another.

The first two girls who approached him were obviously too silly and shallow to be of any use, and Renner sent them away. Observing this the other hostesses were inclined to stay away. There were enough men available without wasting time on one who wasn't interested. After a certain length of service in this business, all men came to look more or less alike. . . . An interval elapsed before a shadow fell across the table, and Renner looked up and saw Emily standing there, quite calm and composed.

He rose quickly, the shock clear on his bronzed features, and gripped the hand she extended, drawing her down into the chair beside his. "Em! What are you doing *here*?"

"A girl has to live, Martin," she said lightly.

"What's wrong with living at home?"

"I'm not so welcome there any more," Emily said. "You might as well know it all. I made an unfortunate marriage. My husband died soon afterward. I found I couldn't live with my folks any longer."

"Who was he, Em?" asked Renner.

"Nobody you knew, Marty. His name was Tom Hilliard, up from New Mexico Territory. He worked for Jack Herne.

He was killed on the job—either by Jack's enemies or his own gunhands."

Renner stared at her, turning his cropped head slowly from side to side, his face bleak and desolate.

Emily laughed softly. "It's not as bad as that, Martin. He wasn't a bad boy. Just a little wild and crazy—and weak. And I don't do anything here but dance."

"That's enough, isn't it?"

"It is," she agreed evenly. "But I want you to know that I don't work upstairs, and I don't live here. I have a cabin of my own, down by the river."

Renner smiled ruefully. "I've got no right to question you anyway, Emily. Forgive me."

"You have the right—if you want it, Marty. And I'm not ashamed of anything. Except maybe marrying so unwisely. But I—I was lost after you left, Martin—didn't know what to do, and nothing seemed to matter."

"I've been lost too, Em," said Renner. "Will you have a drink?" She nodded and he poured one. "You're looking better than ever, Emily." She had bloomed into full ripe womanhood, with a quiet composure, an easy grace of manner. There was sadness and loneliness and courage in her, and it made her the more intriguing.

"We've both changed, Marty," she murmured. "Seven years is a long time."

It rankled in him to think of her married to another man, and to see her employed, however innocently, in a palace of pleasure like this. But he had only himself to blame. He was the one who had broken off and gone away, abandoned her without an explanation. Because he himself could not understand the compulsion that drove him out of the Dondrino Valley.

"Don't these gunsharps of Herne's know who I am?" Renner asked, abruptly switching the subject.

"They know you, Mart. They don't want any trouble with you."

His smile was thin and fleeting. "Do you think they had anything to do with my father's death?"

"You don't believe it was suicide, Marty?"

"I know damn well it wasn't. And so do you, Em."

Emily inclined her dark head. "I've had that suspicion, Martin. But I don't really know anything about it."

"Nobody does," Renner said. "But I'm going to find out. How do I get to see Herne?"

Alarm widened her brown eyes. "Don't try to see him. It won't do any good. You can't fight his whole crew, Marty."

"I just want to talk with him, Em."

"You won't gain anything, Martin. Please believe me. You'll only get hurt."

"I've got to start somewhere," said Renner. "There's one gag that generally works in a dive like this. . . . What do you think of Rawhide's widow, and Dake Tirone? A lovely refined lady and a cultured charming gentleman? Is there any tie-up between them and Jack Herne?"

Emily's expression was mildly astonished. "I've never seen any sign of it, Martin. They're very close to Guy Ormond, you know, and Guy despises Herne—as much as your dad did."

Renner sighed. "I know, Em. But I've got to figure every angle there is." He glanced at the whirling bobbing maelstrom of the dance hall. Big Mule Garay was signaling to Emily from the edge of the floor, disregarding Renner entirely. "You're being summoned, Em."

Emily looked up with a grimace. "Excuse me for a few minutes, Marty. I do this to keep peace in the outfit. Please don't go away. I'll be right back." She walked out into the formal embrace of the smiling giant, who danced her off with surprising grace and finesse. Renner watched them in disgust. The end of a beautiful young love, he thought bitterly. Your girl married to a cheap gunny, and winding up in this gilded sinkhole of corruption.

He decided to make his move toward Black Jack Herne while Emily was engaged with Mule Garay, even though Benny Blue and Shelby hadn't arrived to cover him as yet. There was too much impatience in Renner to permit waiting any further. Pretending to be rather drunk, he carried his bottle to the bar and called a bartender.

"This here rotgut is watered down fifty per cent. I want to see the owner of this two-bit dump."

"He don't like to be bothered, mister. Sometimes he turns

the boys loose on strangers who make nuisances of themselves. Just for laughs they're apt to beat you half to death, friend."

"Never mind that hogwash," Renner said, speaking thickly and swaying a trifle. "I want to see the big boss, understand?"

The barkeeper grinned and pointed to the office door at the rear. "Right in there, pardner! If you're sure you want what you're askin' for?" He watched Renner's unsteady progress with a leer of anticipation.

Spider Webley opened the door to let Renner in, closing it immediately and watching from the background. Jack Herne raised his sleek pomaded head from the food-laden tray on his massive shining desk. He was small and plump, with heavy hooded eyes, a large bulbous nose, and tiny lipless mouth above a fat dimpled chin. A scarlet flower glowed in the lapel of his white jacket. He was infinitely smug and superior behind that carved desk. Something about him made Renner's spine crawl and his stomach turn sourly.

"What do you want?" Herne asked, in a thin piping voice.

Renner waved the bottle in his hand. "This liquor's cut."

"So?" Herne patted his mouth with a linen napkin. "Would you like a drink that isn't diluted?" He displayed neither recognition nor interest. Leaning back with supreme indifference, he blinked appreciatively at some of the lewd pictures on the wall.

"No, thanks," Renner said. "Don't you know me, Jack?"

Herne yawned. "Should I? Afraid I can't claim the pleasure." And Spider Webley, lurking behind Renner, chortled with dry malice.

Renner scanned the overfurnished room. A gunrack in the corner held a variety of rifles and pistols, old and new, but no big single-shot Sharps, as far as Renner could discern.

"I want to talk to you—alone, Herne." Renner no longer acted drunk. "Get your watchdog off my back."

Herne gurgled with low laughter. "You can talk in front of Spider. But what on earth about?"

"You know I'm Mart Renner."

"So you're Mart Renner—if you say so. And what is that to me?" Herne gestured with airy disdain. "You're inter-

rupting my supper, whoever you are. Show the gentleman out, Spider."

"This way, son," said Spider Webley.

Renner stood baffled and furious. He'd expected any kind of a reception but this. He had run into a blank wall here, and he felt futile and bewildered. "All right, Herne. But you'll be seeing more of me."

Black Jack Herne shrugged, and bent forward to sniff the spicy foods. "Please, before my supper gets cold. Get out, before I lose my patience. And don't come back." Herne dismissed him with a contemptuous flip of his pudgy white hand, that sparkled with jeweled rings and a bracelet.

Spider Webley tapped Renner's shoulder and ushered him to the door, opening it with a slight hunched bow. "You're gettin' off easy, sonny," he said gently. "Don't try to buck the long odds. The percentages are all against you."

"We'll see, Spider," said Renner, with an absent smile at the misshapen little man.

Carrying the bottle back to his corner table, Renner searched for Emily in the massed crowd. She was nowhere in sight, and Mule Garay also had disappeared. Probably they were upstairs together right now. Perhaps she was Garay's woman now, or maybe common property for all of Herne's gunmen. That was no doubt an act she had put on for Renner's benefit. A virtuous young widow freelancing in a dance hall, trying to make an honest decent living for herself. He was sure getting gullible, to swallow a line like that, just because he'd known and loved the girl years ago in his teens.

Renner threw down a drink and looked around for Benny and Shelby, but something must have delayed them in town. It might be fortunate that Herne didn't consider him important enough to fret about. If that were true, Renner would have more leeway to work in. . . . But Black Jack could have been doing some play acting too, not wanting to kill Renner here in the Castle, planning to have him taken when the place and time came right.

Renner dallied over another drink, but neither Emily nor Garay made a reappearance. He decided to go back into the center and see if Benny Blue and Shelby were in some

kind of trouble. If not, he might go and visit his father's widow in the old homestead, or call on Guy Ormond, or borrow a horse and ride out to Mill Iron. There were enough things to be done, enough ground to be covered, and thus far he was getting nowhere fast.

Pushing out through the tall ornate swing-doors, Renner hesitated in the shadows of the Crystal Castle to breathe in the fresh night air. Long double rows of hitch-rails were jammed solid with saddle broncs and wagons. Herne had a gold mine here, and no mistake. . . . Then it came to him that Emily could be in danger, needing his help. Maybe they were quizzing her about him. . . . But Renner thought not. More likely she was in the arms of Mule Garay, just "to keep peace in the outfit."

Renner had started walking away when furtive sounds from the rear brought him wheeling about, but already a gun barrel was swishing down on his head. Renner ducked and dodged, but too late to avoid the shocking impact. His brain exploded in a white-hot flash, his legs melted, and the ground rushed up at him. He felt gravel under his cheek, grit against his teeth, and he rolled over and away with a frenzied effort, glimpsing three dark forms silhouetted against the entrance lights. Elgart and Garay and Webley, closing in. They knew him all right.

Heavy boots lashed into his body with bone-splintering force, driving the breath from his lungs. Renner grappled at the swinging legs and hooked onto one, heaving the man off balance and down between the other two. Flinging himself backward along the dirt, Renner rolled and came to his feet with gun drawn, but they were all over him before he could use it. Fists smashed his face, and something wrenched the Colt from his hand. Renner struck back and landed a few, but he was still stunned from the gun-whipping and most of his blows were smothered.

Working with methodical speed and precision the three men poured punches into him from all sides, slashing his face and head, ripping low and deep into his abdomen. A jolt in the throat left Renner gagging and retching, sick and breathless, still upright but blind and tottering. A smash in the groin from Spider Webley doubled Renner over, and an

uppercut by Pine Elgart lifted him up straight and tall again. Then Mule Garay unleashed the crusher that all but tore Renner's head off his shoulders. The earth slammed up against his skull and spine, and all consciousness left Renner as his long legs dropped loosely asprawl.

They went on working him over with cruel boots and knuckles, but Martin Renner was mercifully oblivious to this final punishment.

VII

SUNLIGHT streamed through window glass and splintered agonizingly into bruised lids and aching eyeballs. The bed was luxuriously soft and comfortable, but scarcely enough so for Renner's racked body. He groaned and opened his eyes and wondered where he was. Carefully he moved his arms and legs, touched his ribs and hips. He hurt all over, but his limbs functioned. There didn't seem to be any broken bones. His eyes wouldn't open very wide, and his face felt swollen and stiff. Behind lacerated lips his teeth were intact, but they had done quite a job on him. He wondered why they hadn't finished it.

Renner's head was fairly clear, the roaring pain diminished to a dull nagging throb, and his eyes gradually began to focus. It was a bright, cheerful, thoroughly feminine room. Handmade dressing table and chair, with a mirror and a glittering array of bottles. A bookshelf, pastel prints, Navajo rugs on the floor, lace curtains at the windows. He hadn't expected to wake up at all, and certainly not in a scented bower like this.

The sunshine had an afternoon look, and through an open window he saw the fresh spring greenery of cottonwoods, salt cedars and willows. He remembered now a vague nightmare interlude, in which people fussed over him while he seemed suspended between life and death. Faces had swum in a steaming haze above him, Emily, Benny Blue, young Shelby, and Doc Seabrey. Voices had hummed from a vast distance. But it was difficult to differentiate between reality and fantasy, for he had seen other faces with equal clarity,

faces of the dead. Rawhide and Doak and Glenway had been there, as real as any of the rest. . . . But the only absolute reality had been the pain.

Emily appeared in the doorway, slim and sweet in a gingham house dress, looking younger and lovelier than she had in the scarlet satin. "You feeling better, Martin?" She came and sat down in the bedside chair. "Your eyes are clearer, you look a lot better."

Renner moved his head up and down on the pillow, aware of the lump on the side of his skull. Lucky that pistol barrel hadn't landed squarely. "How'd I get here, Em?" He accepted a glass of water and drank thirstily.

"Young Shelby and Benny Blue brought you. They came along in time to drive Herne's men off."

"Where did you disappear to last night?"

"Garay dragged me into a private dining room to question me, Marty, and left me locked in there. One of the girls let me out, and I came home with Benny and Shelby."

"Does Herne know I'm here?"

"Nobody knows it, except your friends and Doc Seabrey."

"You can't go back there, Emily," said Renner.

"I don't intend to, Martin."

"Where's Benny and Shelby?"

"In town," Emily said. "They'll be out again this evening."

Renner moaned wearily. "Herne's bunch'll be after them now. And you won't be safe, if they find out I'm here."

"They won't bother me, Marty. Jack won't let them. I think he feels guilty about Tom Hilliard's death, and tries to make it up to me as much as possible."

"You took that pretty hard, Em?"

"No, I didn't really. . . . It was a mistake from the start."

Renner reached out a hand, and Emily clasped it in both of hers. "How could you marry anyone else, Em?"

Her smile was sad and wistful. "How could you run off and leave me, without a word, Martin?"

"You've got me there, Em," admitted Renner. "I don't know. Never did and never will."

"Well, you're back now, Marty." She leaned over and kissed him lightly on his sore puffed mouth. "If I can only keep you alive here."

"I'm going to live—for a while anyway," Renner said somberly. "But I'll have to do some killing, Em."

"There are men here who have it coming to them," Emily said. "I don't care, Martin, as long as you don't get hurt."

Renner sat up in the bed. "Time I was up and moving, Em. Did they think a beating would stop me?"

"They'll use guns the next time, Marty."

"That's the way I want it," Renner said softly.

"I washed and ironed your clothes," Emily told him. "Benny and Shelby brought your gun and hat too. If I haul in a tub of hot water, can you climb into it, Martin?"

Renner nodded slowly. "May not be able to climb out again. But I reckon I will. Don't feel too bad, considering."

Alone in the room with the tub of steaming water, soap and towels, Renner paced about to limber his stiffened joints and bruised muscles before sliding in to soak and scrub his battered frame in a leisurely soothing bath. Dressing in the crisp clean clothing Emily had laid out for him, after an interval of toweling and cooling off, Renner felt wonderfully refreshed and restored, almost normal again. And in the mirror his face, cut and welted as it was, did not look as bad as he had anticipated.

This must be the cabin Emily had lived in with Tom Hilliard, mused Renner, out near the Dondrino River at the southwestern edge of the settlement. He didn't like to think about that, but it persisted in his mind. Only six months of marriage, but that was altogether too much. Could he be contented with a woman who had been married to another man? Renner didn't know, even though he'd been first with her. In the pure flame of their young love, Emily had withheld nothing. It was understood that they would marry, as soon as Renner was of age, and their need had been too great to resist. It had been the first experience for both of them, a passion deep and mature beyond their years.

Now all Renner had was the consolation of having been the first. Her affair with Hilliard, legal and proper though it had been, left her sullied and tainted somehow, in his estimation. It was unfair of him, of course. What about the women he'd had down in Arizona and New Mexico, Texas and Old Mexico? They didn't count to him, but the fact remained

that he'd been with them, which placed him in no position to be so critical of Emily Hale. He refused to think of her married name.

Emily turned to regard him with approval and admiration, as he emerged from the bedroom into a pleasant homelike living room. The cottage was larger than he'd expected, immaculate and well furnished. Black Jack Herne could afford to pay his gunnies—and his girls—good wages, Renner thought bitterly. But Emily's smile mellowed him, as she said:

"You look like a new man, Martin. A very handsome man indeed."

"I feel almost like one. New, not handsome."

"You're staying for supper, Marty," she went on. "Benny and Shelby are coming to eat with us. I want to show you how well I cook, perhaps."

"This is nice, Emily," he said, looking around. "But I shouldn't have taken your bed."

"I managed well enough on the couch, Marty." She colored faintly along the clean-curved cheekbones. "I used to sleep on the couch most of the time—once."

Renner stepped forward and she came into his arms, fitting as well as ever, full-bodied and firmly soft against him, her arms gripping hard and her dark head tilting back. He lowered his mouth to hers and crushed that red ripeness with slow increasing pressure, and the pain of his cut lips was sweet and sharp. The years melted away between them, and it was as it had been with them—or almost so. There was the feeling of being back where they both belonged, and for Renner it seemed for the first time that he had come home.

Shaken and awed by the power and beauty of it, they parted lingeringly and then walked out onto the porch overlooking the wooded bluff of the river. Eastward along the stream Renner saw a smudge of smoke staining the air above the sprawling village, and he asked Emily what it was, a cold premonition in him before she answered:

"Sam Derry's place burned before sunup. It's been smoking all day. Poor old Sam never got out of it."

"Another murder," Renner said, chilled and rigid with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. "And one I'm to blame for—in a way."

"Why do you say that, Marty?"

"Two nights ago I went to see Sam Derry. Somebody saw me coming from there, and took a shot at me. Now they've killed old Sam because they thought he'd talked to me. Or would talk to me, in time."

"About what, Martin?"

"About the gun that killed my father, Em," said Renner.

"But who, Martin? Who can it be?"

"I don't know, Em. But I'm going to have a talk with the widow. I've got a hunch she and Dake Tirone are hitched up some way with Jack Herne's outfit." Renner walked away from her and the cabin, a flare of fury burning all through him, scorching away his soreness and pain. That did it. He had to get to those killers and fast. Before Emily Hale and Shelby and Benny Blue suffered and died, for being on his side of the fence.

The sun was sinking red toward the jagged Caprocks on the far western horizon, and southward the Sandstone Hills were hazy in the distance. The Taloncillos were piled high against the eastern skyline, and beyond them was the Colorado River, slanting across the southeastern corner of Utah. On the north sandstone cliffs rose, step after step, to the vast tablelands that swept all the way to the Uinta Mountains, and in the northwest towered the grand crests of the Wasatch Range. A land of fabulous colors and sweeping distances, so far-flung that this great valley was lost in the immensity of it. A country that Martin Renner knew and loved, as his father had before him.

Renner remembered long riding trips he had taken with Emily in the past, and some of the ancient scenic marvels they had witnessed together. West to the fantastic erosion spires, columns and turrets of Bryce Canyon. Southeast to the remote unsettled wilderness of the San Juan River area, with its picturesque natural arches and bridges of weathered sandstone, its prehistoric cliff dwellings, ruins and fossils. And northward on the lofty broken plateaus, between the Wasatches and Green River . . . Once, with Rawhide and Doak, he had gone as far as Great Salt Lake and the desert in northwestern Utah.

The lengthening shadows darkened from gray to blue,

lavender to purple, and the sun went down behind the Caprocks, setting fire to all the clouds in the western sky. Emily was busy in the kitchen, from which delicious odors drifted, and Renner sat on the porch smoking a cigarette. There was something heart-warming and homelike about the situation, and Renner suddenly wished that they were married, as they long since should have been, and settled down securely in a place of their own. But he had a lot to do before he could start thinking along those lines. He was going to look at a number of men through the gunsmoke, and he might not be around himself when it finally cleared.

It was dusk when Renner heard hoofs clopping in this direction, and he went inside and buckled on his gun belt and waited at the corner of the house. Benny Blue and Shelby appeared in the gloom, riding their horses and leading another, and Renner's heart went up at the sight of them. They stepped down and tied the broncs to the rail, and Renner saw that Shelby had fully recovered from his drunken spree, and was clear-eyed, fresh-faced and smiling with boyish charm.

Benny Blue scowled at Renner. "You look some better'n I expected. The pot's beginning to boil in Brandvil. You better lay low for a spell, Mart. I'm gettin' tired of havin' to save your life."

"They got Sam Derry, I hear," said Renner.

"It was set all right," Benny said. "Must of soaked it in kerosene. Nothin' much left of old Sam."

"Brought you these, Mart." Ycung Shelby handed over his spurs, and the holstered Colt from his saddlebags.

"Thanks, Shelby. And to both of you for last night." Renner removed his shell belt, slipped the sheathed gun onto the left side of it, and laid belt and spurs on a porch chair.

"We was a little late, Mart," drawled Shelby "They ducked inside when we cut down on 'em. Too bad we didn't drop some of 'em, but there wasn't any use tryin' to smoke 'em out of the Castle."

"Supper's ready, boys," called Emily, from the doorway.

"So am I, Em," said Benny Blue. "Smells like real grub in there. Ought to taste right good after that saloon fodder I been eatin'."

Shelby placed a hand on Renner's arm. "They say Wolf Leiken's workin' for Rawhide's widow now, Marty."

Martin Renner hefted the double-holstered belt thoughtfully. "Now I know I'm going to call on Cynthia this evening."

VIII

THE meal had been excellent—roast beef, potatoes, boiled onions, corn muffins, lemon pie, and coffee—the best Renner had tasted in years. The company was up to the occasion, with Emily a gracious hostess. Shelby was gay and laughing, Benny dour and cryptic, and Renner was quiet, appreciative, and gratified to be among good friends again.

The dishes done, Benny and Shelby adjourned to the porch, and Emily moved into Renner's arms for a long tender kiss. "Please take care of yourself, Marty—for me," she murmured.

"I'll be all right, Em," he said. "Are you sure you'll be safe here?"

Emily said she was positive of it, and Renner released her with reluctance, to strap on his guns, tie down the holsters, and pick up his hat. Outside he hooked on the spurs and was ready to go, with Emily waving and watching from the doorway. They had a big rangy bay gelding for Renner, a horse worthy of replacing the coyote dun, he judged, as he stepped into the leather. Benny was riding a tough wiry grullo, and Shelby swung aboard a sleek glossy black.

The bay pitched and bucked a bit, until he learned that the man on his back knew his business. Renner found it good to be back in the saddle. Although he'd only been here two nights and two days, it seemed much longer than that. They rode slowly toward the luminous glare of Front Street, and Benny Blue said:

"A lot of woman, that Emily Hale."

"Did you know Hilliard?" asked Renner.

"Used to see him around," Benny said. "Not a bad kid. Just hoot-owl wild and thirsty for firewater like young Shelby here. I hope he ain't stickin' in your craw, Mart, after all the roosterin' around you probably done with them calico queens down south."

Renner laughed quietly. "You judge us all by your own wicked and misspent youth, Benny. Who lives in the big house with Cynthia?"

"Just the servants—includin' maybe Wolf Leiken now. She has Dake Tirone and Guy Ormond and other leadin' citizens for company now and then."

"You don't think there's anything between her and Tirone?"

"Nothin' that shows in public," Benny Blue said. "And somethin' like that generally shows, no matter how they try to hide it."

"Is old Jubal still there?" inquired Renner.

"Still in the stable, last I knew."

Shelby said, "We comin' to the house with you, Marty?"

Renner shook his head. "You boys drift around and keep an eye on things. If the Wolf makes a play, it will be in the open. I'll leave my horse at the corral behind the Brock, and meet you back there in about an hour."

From the livery barn, Renner walked through the back yards, alleys and streets toward the northeastern outskirts of Brandvil. It was with oddly mingled emotions that he approached his childhood home. The great fieldstone structure, as solid and durable as Rawhide Renner himself had been, loomed in crude grandeur over this select residential section. A stone wall surrounded the grounds. Lamplight glowing from the windows failed to warm or soften the general bleakness of the house.

To Renner, in childhood, it had seemed a vast gloomy pile, with rooms like lonely echoing caverns. Yet it was the first home he had known, and his earliest memories were woven about it. Had his mother lived, it might have been different. He remembered her but dimly, of course, and mostly from her pictures or what people told him about her. After her death, as the boys grew older, they spent more time on Mill Iron than in town. But without the mother, neither place had been truly home.

Renner went through the wide open gate in the wall, and up the flagstone path to the front entrance, studying the familiar gaunt outlines of the main structure, the stable and outbuildings. Now it housed the willful blonde woman who had married his father and inherited everything that old

Rawhide had sweated and schemed, labored and fought and bled for. A life's work like that come to nothing. A dynasty in the hands of strangers.

A maid answered the door, and was asking for Renner's name when Cynthia entered the hall behind her, saying, "Oh, it's you, Martin. Please come in. I've been hoping you'd call." Something told him that she was aware of his identity, and he was glad of it.

The servant withdrew, and Renner followed the stately lady of the house into the richly furnished living room, where a low fire crackled in the broad stone fireplace. She seated him on a long deep leather divan before the hearth, proffered a hammered-silver cigar box, and poured drinks from a cut-glass decanter.

Sitting down beside him, Cynthia stared at his bruised features with a frank interest that was disconcerting. "Your home-coming has been eventful, I understand. Have you found out who's been shooting at you, Martin?"

"Not yet. But I will."

She smiled and gestured airily. "Do you find the place changed?"

"Some," he confessed, drawing on the expensive cigar.

"For the better, I hope. It needed a woman's touch, Martin—after all those years."

"Yes, I guess it did." Renner sampled his drink.

"Strange, but I felt some kinship with you on the stage-coach the other day," Cynthia said earnestly. "As if I had known you, or should know you. I believe our lives were destined to cross, Martin."

"Maybe."

She slid closer, her fragrant nearness disturbing, her blue eyes warm and intent on his lean hard profile. Cynthia swayed still nearer, shoulder and thigh touching him, invitation plain on her keen face and full-lipped mouth.

Renner shifted uneasily, seeing the rise and fall of her high full breasts in the taut silk bodice. She acted like a woman bent on seduction. He found it far from pleasant to have his father's widow behaving in such a manner. Rawhide had been wrong in this one instance, for all his boasting that he never made a mistake in people or horses.

"Do you want to discuss your settlement, Martin?" asked Cynthia. "No? Then what shall we talk about?"

He looked at her, straight and cold. "About who killed Rawhide."

Her face froze and her golden head drew back a trifle. "What do you mean? What *are* you talking about?"

"You must know my father was murdered," Renner said. "Maybe you know who did it." He was purposely brutal, hoping to shock some admission out of her.

But Cynthia was too wise and poised, too much the actress, for that. She stared at him aghast. "You'd better leave at once!"

Renner laughed softly. "In due time, ma'am." He drained his glass and stood up, pacing about the magnificent room and puffing on the cigar. The woman had good taste—in some things, at least. The furnishings were all in harmony, rich but restrained. He looked into the room that had been Rawhide's den. The gunrack was still there, but the old buffalo gun was missing from its place.

"What became of that old Sharps fifty-six?" he demanded.

"How would I know?" Cynthia countered, a harshness about her lips and eyes. "I don't know one gun from another." She rose and walked after him. "Was it yours, Martin?"

"No, it was Dad's." He laid the cigar down in an ashtray.

She shrugged. "What difference does it make? There are enough rifles left there."

"The one I mean is the rifle that killed my father. Has Dake Tirone got it? Or did he lend it to Black Jack Herne?" Renner was laying it on deliberately, in an effort to crack that gilt shell of hers.

"Martin, you're being ridiculous, talking insanely." Cynthia caught his arm, pulled him about, and eased herself against him. "I don't want to quarrel with you. I like you, Martin." She wrapped ardent arms around his neck, and drew his high head down, lifting her hungry mouth to his, pressing the full length of her lush figure to him. Renner stayed aloof and rigid for a moment. Then a flickering flame started in his loins and fired his blood, and against all in-

clination he was holding and kissing her, heedless of the painful pressure on his sore lips.

Cynthia drew back a little, eyes lifted and glazed with emotion. "I like you, Martin," she breathed again. "I could more than like you. I felt it the minute I saw you out there in the pass. Stay here—with me, Martin. We'll have everything, you and I. A whole empire of our own."

Renner was suddenly sickened of himself, and of her. "I can't, Cynthia. You were Rawhide's wife." Fighting down his revulsion, he tried to keep his voice kind and gentle. He could have this woman, and he might learn the truth about his father's death from her, but he couldn't go through with it. He was seared with shame for having gone this far.

"What difference does that make? Your father and I were just—companions."

"It's no good," Renner said flatly.

"I can save your life, Martin," she pleaded. "If you don't stay with me, they'll kill you."

"Who, Cynthia? Who are they?"

"Whoever it is that's been shooting at you—and beating you. I don't know, but I'm afraid, Martin. Terribly afraid."

"I can't stay anywhere until I find out who killed my father."

"What good'll that do him, or you, or anyone?" she demanded.

"No good probably," Renner admitted. "But I've got to do it."

Cynthia shook him with amazing strength and ferocity. "You're a fool, Martin! Look at me! Look at all I can give you. Can't you see what you're missing, throwing away? Along with your life?"

"I can't help it." Instinctively, without realizing it, Renner pushed her away, failing to conceal his expression of distaste.

She gazed at him incredulously, and then flamed into fury. "Get out! Go on, get yourself killed! You're too foolish to live, boy!"

Renner smiled wryly. "You might have something there, ma'am." Being unable to play the role of lover to his father's widow had cost Renner his chance of learning anything

from Cynthia. His smile became mocking. "Are you going to turn your Wolf loose on me?"

"If I do, you won't reach the gate alive!"

"Maybe so. And maybe you'll have a dead Wolf on your hands."

Cynthia slapped his cheek with sound ringing emphasis. "Go on, get out! Get out and die in the gutter where you belong. Your own father said you were good for nothing!" She was almost hysterical with rage, at being rejected.

"Thank you, ma'am." Renner managed to make this a final insult, as he turned away and picked up his hat. He could feel her furious eyes on him all the way to the door. She'd surely send Leiken after him now. Renner was ready, but he knew he'd have to be swifter and surer than ever before, if he was to take the Wolf.

He went down the flagstone walk, loosening the right-hand gun in its leather and waiting for the sound of footsteps behind him. The night air smelled faintly of Cherokee roses, and the rooftops of Brandvil were frosted with silver in the moonlight. Renner reached the gate in the stone wall without being challenged, and turned along the dirt path toward the center of town.

The sound came to him then, and Renner made a full turn, spine prickling coldly and throat dry and tight. Wolf Leiken emerged from the gateway and stood facing him in the moonbeams, a lazy, lounging, deadly figure in black, eyes shining palely and hair showing white under his hat.

"I don't want to kill you, kid," Leiken said, slow and distinct. "Didn't want to kill your brother that time. . . . But I carry guns for a living, and I've got a job to do. Will you get out of town?"

"Who's paying you—besides the widow?"

"Nobody—but that don't matter. Will you pull out of here?"

"No, Wolf. Because I want to kill you," Renner said. "I've waited a long time for this."

Wolf Leiken sighed. "So you're asking for it, like your brother Doak did? Well, it might as well be me as Herne's gunnies. From me you get a fair shake, at least."

"The first I've had in Brandvil," said Renner. "I appreciate it, Wolf."

"A friend of yours just went to work for Mill Iron. By the name of Coke Tansill. He won't like me for this, Renner, but I thought I'd let you know—before you die."

"He'll get his turn, along with the rest of them," Renner said.

"Enough talking," Leiken said. "Reach, friend, or you'll never clear leather."

They moved simultaneously, swift blurs of motion in the thin shadowy light, the flame from their guns blossoming together, the reports merged in a single shattering roar. The Colt springing in his hand, Renner saw Wolf Leiken's muzzle light spurt on a downward slant, while his own leaped level and straight. He had the first one home solid, and Leiken was jerking and breaking at the knees with a .44 slug in him when his own bullet raked a spray of dirt across Renner's boots.

Martin Renner pulled down from the recoil and fired again, the bright blast beating Leiken backward as he strained to control his gun hand for another shot. The Wolf's shoulders struck the far side of the gate, and his weapon exploded upward at the starry sky as he hung there. Toppling slowly forward Wolf Leiken fell full length across the gateway, twitched spasmodically and succumbed into stillness on the flagstones. Looking shriveled and shrunken in his dark suit, hat tipped forward and silvery head glimmering in the light of the moon and stars.

Renner heard a door burst open within the stone wall, a woman's voice cry out in horror and disbelief, and he swung around and strode away, with the smoking gun still hanging in his big right hand, the taste of powder bitter in his dry mouth. There was one of them, one of the worst, and it evened the score for Doak and cut down the odds somewhat. . . . There was no regret in Renner, but a dull sickness of mind as well as body. The resentment of an individual forced to play executioner, as men so often were in a raw new country like this.

But it had to be done, and Renner was glad that he had measured up to it. He wished that Rawhide and Doak could

have seen it, and maybe looked at him with some respect for the first time. . . .

He was turning in between two houses, to cut for the back yard of the Brock House, when Sheriff Abel Sullers hailed him and came forward under the cottonwood trees. "I'm taking you this time, Martin," he said grimly. "You've been shooting again, and this time I figure somebody's dead."

"Right, Abe. It's Wolf Leiken, and he forced it on me. You'll find him back there in the gate."

"You beat Wolf Leiken to the draw? You can tell that to a jury."

"Who'd you arrest for the murder of Sam Derry?"

"He died in a fire."

"Sure, and my father committed suicide," Renner said, disgustedly. "Don't try to run me in tonight, Abe."

Sullers bared his teeth under the neat mustache. "Get out of town then. You're nothing but a walking corpse in Brand-vill"

"I'll get out, Abe. After this bushwhacking outfit is busted wide open, I'll get out." Renner stared down at him, lips thinned straight and tight on his teeth, cheekbones and jawbones standing out. "And don't push me too far, Abe. I took the Wolf like he took my brother. You didn't try to arrest him ten years ago."

The sheriff started to speak, halting with an exasperated expression when boots trod the plank walk in back of Renner. It was Guy Ormond again, tall and gravely distinguished in the leaf-patterned shadows.

"It was self-defense, Abel, and I'll testify to it," Ormond declared immediately. "I saw the whole thing."

"You're always prying me off this boy," complained Sullers. "Every time I get something on him, you come along and clear him. What kind of a game is this, Guy?"

Ormond cast a withering look at the lawman. "I don't care for your insinuations, Sullers. I might ask you who you're working for, that you're forever trying to lock this boy up? Right is right. I happened to be going to call on Mrs. Renner, when I saw Leiken come out and jump Martin. As plain a case of self-defense as I ever witnessed, Sheriff."

"All right, all right," muttered Sullers. "It's never any-

thing but self-defense in this valley. He's all yours again, Guy. I hope you enjoy him—while you can." He stalked back toward the square in profound disgust, not even bothering to go and look at Leiken's body.

Guy Ormond smiled benevolently at Renner. "That was pretty work with the gun, Martin. Rawhide would have loved that, son. You'd better come along with me now. You'll be safe at my house. This town's getting too hot, even for you, my boy."

"Sorry, Guy, but I've got to meet somebody," Renner said. "I'm much obliged to you, but this other thing can't wait."

"Well, watch out for yourself," Ormond said, somewhat testily. "I worry constantly about you, Martin. Everybody in the Dondrino seems to want you dead. . . . I'll go back and pay my respects to Mrs. Renner. I suppose Sullers will send his deputies after the body."

"How'd she happen to have Leiken working for her, Guy?"

"I don't know anything about that. Possibly she hired him for protection."

"Well, she can hire somebody else now," Martin Renner said. "If anybody wants the job, after they hear about Wolf Leiken. Good night, Guy."

He pushed off through the alley, and Ormond retraced his steps toward the fieldstone house.

Shelby and Benny Blue were waiting with the horses in the shadow of the livery stable, nervous and agitated. Shelby said, "We've got to ride, Mart. Herne and his gunmen headed for Emily's cabin. They must of found out she took you in last night. No tellin' what they'll do to her."

They mounted and wheeled off into a run at once, and Benny Blue asked above the clatter of hoofs, "You and the Wolf had it out?"

Renner nodded. "He's a dead Wolf, Benny. Who's Herne got with him?"

"The Big Three."

"That's fine," Renner said, as they settled their mounts into a long swinging pace toward the southwest perimeter of the settlement. "The four we want. Away from the Castle and the rest of the pack. Take some of 'em alive and let 'em sing for us."

"Real sweet," laughed Shelby, "the music them jaybirds'll make."

They must think Emily knows more than she does about their affairs, Renner was thinking. They're afraid she's talked, or will talk to me, just as they feared Sam Derry might. . . . But they wouldn't kill a woman. *Or would they?* . . . Renner felt a freezing flutter of pure panic at the thought.

The cottage, isolated on its shelf, stood cleanly silhouetted against the moon-glimmering sheen of the Dondrino River, with cottonwoods and willows throwing jigsaw patterns of shadow on either side. But the place was in darkness, and no horses were visible at the rack. Black Jack Herne's party must have come and gone.

Renner led them in at a reckless gallop, afraid of what they might find there. He had horrible visions of Emily lying dead in blood and darkness within the cabin. . . . They flung off, dropped the reins, and rounded the corner with guns ready, but nothing stirred or breathed there. Renner plunged inside, scratched a match, and lighted a lamp, carrying it from room to room in feverish haste.

The place was empty. There were indications of a slight struggle in the kitchen. They had carried Emily Hale away with them, somewhere into the night.

"The Castle maybe," Benny Blue rasped.

"We'll soon find out," Martin Renner said, blowing out the lamp and leading the way toward the horses.

"Let's not go off half-cocked," suggested Benny, crouching to examine the prints in the turf and dirt. He was an expert reader of sign, and Renner had acquired some tracking skill from Glenway. "Five horses," Benny announced. "They brought one for Em. Maybe goin' farther than the Castle." He got a line on the direction of the hoofmarks, and they mounted and followed the trace away from the cabin.

The trail was lost in the trampled roadway leading to town, but Benny scouted the far side of the thoroughfare while Renner and Shelby went into the nearby Crystal Castle. Herne and his three lieutenants were missing, and Emily Hale hadn't been seen since the previous night. They

rode back to rejoin Benny, and he pointed into the north and said:

"Reckon they kept goin' right on out of town, boys. Herne's got a place up north, and they could be headin' there. But it's a long ways up-country. We'll need bedrolls, jackets, supplies, rifles and shells."

"Let's get what we need and start riding then," Renner said, with irritable impatience.

"Take it easy, son," advised Benny Blue. "They ain't got wings, and they ain't goin' to harm Emily. Not right away."

"I know the country up there, Mart," said Shelby. "Our layout was up that way. We'll catch up with 'em all right."

"They must think Em knows all their secrets," Renner mused. "Or a hell of a lot more than she's told me anyway."

"It's natural if they do," Benny Blue said. "Hilliard was around here when Rawhide died. He must of known, but he might not of spilled it to Em. . . . They could of put Hilliard under, for that matter, because he knew too much and didn't hold with that kind of killin'."

"Come on, Benny," said Renner. "You talk too much, in your old age."

Benny Blue grinned like a gargoyle. "A bartender's only revenge, son."

IX

IN the broken wilderness they pressed northward until the moon set, and then caught a few hours' sleep in the blackness before dawn.

When the sun rose over the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the three men were in the saddle once more, climbing or skirting a series of brilliant sandstone cliffs, which rose like mammoth terraced steps to the high plateaus of eastern Utah. As the sun soared higher, these palisades blazed with many colors, ranging from chalky white to bright vermilion, tier on tier of painted rock walls in a landscape of savage splendor.

The tracks of five horsemen ran before them, plain in places, almost invisible in others. The Herne group had made

no real effort to obscure their trace. Either they expected no pursuit, or they wished to draw Renner after them. Benny Blue watched the prints closely for any undue lag or freshness that might indicate an ambushade. He was certain now that their destination was Black Jack's unworked spread on the tablelands. At times the route followed game trails or wagon roads, and again it led cross-country.

The heat increased and the riders shed their brush jackets, to sweat in shirtsleeves and vests, while the hides of the horses glistened darkly damp and the girths frothed white. Renner and the bay were well acquainted now, and he knew he had a fine Mill Iron gelding in under him. Benny's grullo and Shelby's black were also good mounts, sure-footed like the bay in this treacherous going, with plenty of strength, speed and stamina. They were superbly mounted for this campaign, and they each wore a pair of Colts and had carbines in their saddle scabbards.

The beauty of these giant flaming steps and escarpments was not entirely lost on Renner, although his mind was mainly hemmed in with thoughts of Emily Hale. They had just rediscovered one another, and he did not intend to lose her again. . . . Some of the cliffs ran to one predominant color, while others were striped in various hues. The rims reared like jagged ruined battlements against the molten blue sky, and the terraces were jumbled with colorful boulders, shale and talus debris.

To the west were the rounded crests of the Henry Mountains, with silver-mining settlements, smelters and stamp mills, and east of the Colorado River stood the similar La Sal and Abajo Ranges. These mountains, like the Caprocks, Rawhide had informed his sons once, were formed by the intrusion of igneous rock between layers of sediment, the thrust of molten rock causing the overlying layers to hump into huge domes. Renner wondered how and why he happened to recall that lesson in geology from his father.

By afternoon the sandstone cliffs were behind them, and the great plateau stretched ahead of them into seemingly endless distance, carved by valleys and canyons with streams draining into the Green and Colorado Rivers. Here they came upon rutted wagon roads, scattered ranches and farms,

and saw herds of cattle and sheep grazing on the high plains. The tabletop was floored with bunch grass and sage, the waterways lined with willows and cottonwoods. Piñon, juniper and scrub cedar grew along the way, and higher up were forests of fir and spruce and pine.

Shelby pointed out one lonely deserted little spread, his blue eyes darkened with grief and sorrow. "That was our place," he drawled. "I'll stop by on the way back. My folks are buried there."

They paused in a tiny crossroads community to water and rest the horses, and wet their own throats in the saloon. Their quarry was still several hours ahead of them, bound without question for Herne's ranch house . . . They retightened their cinches and rode on into the north.

The westering sun was at their left now, still lofty above the magnificent Wasatch Range, the backbone of Utah Territory, running north and south for hundreds of miles and dividing this country into its two natural main sections: the Great Basin of the west, and the plateaus in the east. Some more of Rawhide's teaching, this time in geography, Martin Renner remembered. . . . Far northward the Uinta Mountains marched hazily across the skyline to abut the Wasatches at right angles, and Rawhide had remarked that it was unusual for a big range like the Uintas to extend east and west on this continent. The old man had known a lot about many diversified things.

Such as the fact that centuries ago the Great Basin area had been covered by a vast inland sea known as Lake Bonneville, and the Great Salt Lake in the north and Sevier Lake in the south were shrunken remnants of that ancient body of water. And history, too, Rawhide had been familiar with. Legends of the Utes and old Jim Bridger, who trapped here in the 1820's, and how Brigham Young had brought his Mormons to Salt Lake Valley in 1847 . . . Renner remembered these items much better than anything he had learned in school.

Off to the east, the tableland dropped gradually away into the valley of the Green River, and in the remote background towered the Continental Divide, the tremendous peaks of the

Colorado Rockies. Renner wondered if any country anywhere could equal this for variable scenery.

"We ought to get there about sundown," Benny Blue said, spitting a stream of tobacco juice back on the bright gusty air.

"Good," said Renner. "We can move in after dark."

"Herne never kept a crew up here," Shelby said, "but he might have one now, I suppose. We can tell from the looks of the layout anyhow."

The pace had been hard and galling, much of it over a steep tortuous terrain, and Benny's bad leg must have given him considerable pain, but the little man was tough as rawhide and made no mention of it. Shelby was a slim whiplash figure in the leather, full of youth and fire, black hair curled sweatily under his hat, blue eyes reflecting his merry smile. Renner had recovered from that beating with the incredible resilience of a strong young man in perfect health and fighting condition. This long ride had worked out the last of his lameness, and his muscles and joints were loose, pliable and responsive again.

Renner tried not to dwell upon what might be happening to Emily, but the matter invaded his mind with cruel insistence. She had trusted Jack Herne, a thing that no sane person should do, but possibly Herne would shelter her somewhat from the others. Mule Garay was the most dangerous, Renner estimated, having observed Garay's hunger for the girl that night in the dance hall. It made Renner shudder to think of Emily at the mercy of that giant. He hoped there was enough decency in Elgart and Webley to keep Garay under restraint and in line. But with men like that, cold-blooded professional killers, you couldn't expect too much. Well, their string was running out, whether or not they had violated the girl. They were going out the way Wolf Leiken had gone last night.

It came back to Renner what the Wolf had reported about Coke Tansill hiring out to Dake Tirone on Mill Iron. It was inevitable, he supposed, that Tansill should follow him all the way home to the Dondrino. Something lay between them that only death could settle. Tansill had brought on the killing of Glenway, and Renner had cut down some of Coke's

closest comrades—including Joffey, quite by accident. It had gone too far and deep for Coke Tansill to let it drop. The time would come when they'd stand up and face one another over the gun barrels. One more enemy for Martin Renner to fight to the finish.

"I didn't know Herne had stocked his spread," Benny Blue grumbled. "But we're on his grass, and there's a lot of beef driftin' around on it."

Shelby scanned a bunch of cattle in a shallow coulee off the trail. "Some of them critters look mighty damn familiar to me, boys. I'm goin' to have a look at 'em." He reined away into the coulee, with Renner and Blue loping after him. They had noticed Shelby studying the stock they passed.

Shelby turned back from the mouth and nodded firmly, as they rode up. "Some of ours, for sure. I choused them cows enough so I'd know 'em anywhere. We branded a plain S. It's blotted now into a Circle-H, looks like. Ran the S around into a circle and put an H inside it."

Benny Blue and Renner moved in closer to read the brands, and Benny said, "Could be, kid."

"Could be, hell, it *is*!" Shelby declared. "Look at the ear-marks. We undersloped the right and cropped the left. All they did was crop the right ear, too."

"So Herne's rustlin' stock on the side," Benny said sourly. "He don't make enough money in that fancy rattrap of his in Brandvil."

"I wonder who does the riding for him," said Renner, thinking again of some hookup between Black Jack Herne and Dake Tirone.

"Whoever it was shot my dad," Shelby said, teeth on edge.

"We'll find out, kid," said Benny Blue gently. "And when we do, we'll be on our way to the ones that killed Rawhide Penner, too."

"We'll learn a lot tonight, boys," Martin Renner said. "If we can get Herne—or some of them—alive."

They took up the trace again, with the sun dropping nearer the Wasatches and taking on fiery color as it descended, rimming the western clouds with flame.

The sun was setting when they dismounted on a juniper ridge to survey the spread that was their objective. The

buildings occupied a low bench, backed by a sandstone mesa, above a creek that wound across the tableland toward the Green River. The house was of peeled logs, long and low with a gallery across the front. The barn and sheds were built of planks, and the corrals were of the rough stockade type. It didn't look like a working ranch, even with a half-dozen horses in the corral. The sixth pony probably belonged to the caretaker, Renner decided, which made the odds five to three. But the advantage of surprise should even the balance.

"Got any plan in mind, Mart?" inquired Benny Blue.

"Don't need much of a one," Renner said, chewing on the tobacco borrowed from Benny. "They won't expect anybody until tomorrow—if at all. We can go in before the moon comes up." We could wait until they're asleep, he thought. But that would give them too much time to work on Emily, and there was too much impatience in Renner to withstand such a delay. Get in there quick and hit them hard, was all he could think of now. Wipe out the gunmen and take Black Herne alive.

"I can't quite figure them comin' up here," Benny said, scratching the gray stubble on his bony thrusting chin and jaws. "Unless maybe they're goin' to make connections with the rustlers. They could of held Emily in the Castle. It'd take a regiment to spring anybody out of there."

"A break for us, Benny," said Shelby. "They're set up just like we want 'em here."

The sun was gone behind the Wasatches, the light and colors fading slowly on the western horizon, while the lavender shadows spread purple and then black on the earth. Under the junipers the three men checked their carbines and six-guns, watched the yellow shine of lamplight in the windows of the ranch house, and waited for darkness.

X

THE spring night was black before moonrise, with frogs shrilling in the marshes, as they led their horses in under the trees along the murmuring creek. Crickets sang in the

grass, and fireflies traced greenish-white courses through the brush. A wolf howled from the hills, and coyotes cried in distant response, and overhead a nighthawk whimpered in flight. Renner walked ahead with Shelby next in line and Benny Blue bringing up the rear. The stream was a blurred gray ribbon on their right, laced with white where it chuckled against boulders, and the butte behind the ranch site loomed high and angular against the first evening stars.

They tied their horses in the cottonwoods, and went forward with carbines in hand, climbing the slope to the level summit of the shelf, at the rear of the barn and outbuildings. Benny Blue worked to the left around the corrals, while Shelby swung right to circle the sheds, and Renner moved straight in alongside of the barn. At the forward corner Renner stopped to study the scene, the lighted windows of the log house about fifty yards away. A door slammed and a lantern came bobbing across the open yard in his direction. The man carrying it was bearded, big-shouldered in a buckskin jacket, a stranger. Heading for the barn. If Renner could take him without raising an alarm, it would make everything easier.

The man entered the barn, hung the lantern on a peg, and began rummaging around in there. Renner leaned his rifle on the wall, drew his right-hand Colt, and slipped around the edge toward the open doorway. He didn't want to shoot this one, if he could avoid it.

The sudden barking of a dog shattered the stillness, and the man whirled from the grain box as Renner moved into the doorway. Covered as he was the man reached for his holster, and Renner dove straight at him and struck with the gun barrel at the shaggy bare head. The solid impact jarred Renner's arm and bowed the big head, but the man's pistol exploded as it fell to the earthen floor, and the roar of it seemed to fill the whole night. Renner slashed again with his barrel, beating his victim to his knees, and then pitching forward onto the bearded face. He was out for a good time, but the damage was done. Gunshots were blazing from the house when Renner doused the lantern light and dodged into cover, crouching at the side of the entrance.

Benny Blue and Shelby opened up with their carbines from

the flanks, hammering away at the muzzle flashes and smashing windows in the ranch house. But the element of surprise was lost, the situation thrown into a stalemate, with the advantage going to the four men in that log stronghold. The bark of a dog, the accidental discharge of a pistol, and everything went wrong. The damn dog was still barking furiously somewhere in the yard. They should have planned more carefully, Renner realized. It had appeared too easy, and they had taken too much for granted. He wished he had his carbine, but that was out of reach.

The lights had gone out in the house, and the gunfire died away now. Silence washed back in the darkness, as the last echoes thinned out along the steep wall of the mesa. If we wait till moonrise, we won't be able to move at all, Renner thought. They can pin us down or pick us off, once the moon is up. Those corrals and sheds don't give Benny and Shelby much protection, and this barn is almost wide open. . . . I've got to take a chance and get in close and flush them out.

Renner had seen a coil of rope on the wall when the lantern was lighted. He groped around and found it, and then searched for the unconscious hulk of the bearded man, tying the wrists behind the back and looping them to the ankles, also tightly bound. Then he took the gun and moved back beside the doorway, an idea formulating in his brain. "Once you start an attack, keep moving," Glenway always said.

Sliding out the way he had come in, Renner picked up his carbine and dropped back behind the barn, following the row of sheds until he reached Shelby's position between the last two. He called softly to identify himself and moved in beside Shelby, leaving the carbine and extra pistol with him. Shelby could use them in his covering fire.

"I'm going around back of the house, Shelby," said Renner. "You open up and keep firing, and probably Benny will cut loose with you. They figure one of us is in the barn, maybe dead or wounded, because I didn't shoot from there."

"You got the gent with the lantern, Marty?"

"I knocked him out and roped him up. It was his gun that went off in there when I buffaloed him."

"Well, don't try to take 'em all yourself, Mart," drawled Shelby.

Renner grinned in the darkness. "I'm just trying to flush 'em out for you and Benny, kid." He fell back and skirted the last shed and swung in an arc toward the base of the mesa. Shelby started shooting swiftly, and Benny chimed in with rapid fire from the other wing. Gun flames jetted back from three front windows of the house, which indicated that Garay and Elgart and Webley were on the job. Herne was probably hiding behind Emily Hale in some back corner. Now that he was on the move again, Renner's confidence was returning.

The rifles were still blasting away out front, when Renner arrived at the rear of the house in the deep shadow of the butte. None too soon, for a golden moon was peeping over the faraway Rockies, and already the night was lighter. He paused to catch his breath and let his heart slow down, Colt in hand and eyes ranging the log wall and littered back porch. Nothing stirred in that rear area. The door was ajar, half open in fact. Renner was stalking toward it when the big dog leaped snarling at his throat and drove him lurching backward, at the same time that orange muzzle light torched out from the doorway.

Somehow Renner got his right arm up across his neck, and the great jaws closed on his forearm as the hurtling weight of the dog bore him over and under, flat on his shoulderblades beneath that hairy hard-muscled body. The animal shuddered as the bullet hit it, went rigid and then limp on top of the man, the teeth loosening on his arm. Another gun blast slanted down and the beast's body jerked again, and in the flash Renner glimpsed the fat face and oily hair of Black Jack Herne.

There came the sound of a blow, some hard object against bone, and Herne stumbled out onto the porch and floundered on hands and knees, with Emily Hale reeling after him. Renner flung off the dead dog and regained his feet, slamming his gun barrel across Herne's drooping head. Jack grunted, dropped heavily on his face, and lay motionless.

"Wait here and stay down, Em," said Renner, snatching up Herne's gun and thrusting it into her trembling hands.

"Don't, Marty! Don't go in there," she moaned.

"I've got to. It won't take long now." Renner stepped inside the kitchen, and picked his way through darkness toward the front of the house. Moonbeams silvered the windows and filtered into the interior now, and the guns went on hammering along the forward wall.

"Jack!" somebody shouted. "What you got out back there, Jack?"

Mule Garay laughed. "Hell, he's probably shootin' at shadows."

"No, they're comin' in the back way!" Pine Elgart's voice. "The hell with this. I'll take mine outside."

The door burst open and boots trampled the front veranda, and Elgart had gone when Renner reached that room and threw down at the hunched form of Spider Webley. The Spider writhed around and fired back at him, spouting splinters from the inside doorjamb against Renner's cheek, and then Spider scrambled over his windowsill and outside. Renner looked for Garay and couldn't locate him. Then he heard the big man's disgusted voice in the adjacent room: "You crazy bastards! You'll run right into it!" And Garay was coming nearer in the dimness.

Renner lunged in that direction, and they met chest to chest in the doorway, grappling and hacking with their gun barrels, too close together to bring their muzzles to bear. Renner felt the tremendous power of the giant, but in his cold raging fury he could match it and more. As they wrestled and swayed about in primitive combat, Renner took an elbow in the throat, a knee in the groin, and a sledging steel blow on the left shoulder. But he freed his own right hand with an explosive wrench and laid the barrel of the .44 alongside Garay's skull, with full whipping force.

Groaning and gasping, Mule Garay staggered away and tried to swing his pistol into line, but Martin Renner had already leveled off and triggered, the flame lashing into Garay, breaking him in the middle and rocking him backward. Mule's gun blared straight into the floor at his feet. Renner squeezed again, the Colt lifting hard against his wrist, and Mule Garay spun around, took three plunging

strides, and went down with a headlong crash, carrying a table and chairs with him.

Renner made sure of him, and stepped out on the front gallery.

The yard was flooded with moonlight now, and off to the left Spider Webley was a slight twisted bundle on the grass in front of young Shelby, who stood over him with a smoking six-gun. And to the right Pine Elgart was down on his knees and head, arched stiff and lanky against the foot of a cottonwood, while Benny Blue watched him from the edge of the corral with carbine crooked casually in his right elbow. Powder smoke still swirled lazily on the moonlit air.

"Em all right, Marty?" called Shelby.

"She's all right—I think."

"You save any of 'em, Mart?" asked Benny.

"Herne's alive. And the one in the barn." Renner waited for them to come up, and they dragged Garay's great body outside before he brought Emily into the house. Shelby and Benny carried Herne in, bleeding from the scalp and senseless. It was anything but a cheerful place, reeking of gunpowder, with the windows all broken, the furniture tumbled about, and the floor strewn with glass fragments and brass shells. Lamplight seemed to accentuate the morbid disorder.

"An awful thing to put you through, Em," said Renner.

Emily smiled faintly. "A lot better than what they were going to put me through, Martin."

"Did they—did they hurt you, at all?"

She shook her dark head. "No, but they had plans for tonight, I guess. They seemed to think I had given you a lot of important information about Herne and Company. Which I couldn't do because I don't know anything about it. Tom never told me."

"Who's the man out in the barn, Em?" inquired Renner.

"Colfax. He stays up here to take care of the place. I don't think he's in too deep, Marty."

"Maybe not, but he was sure ready to fight," Renner said. "I had him cold, and he still tried to draw."

"Is he—hurt bad?" she asked.

"Just on the head, like Black Jack here."

"And the other three?"

Renner nodded his rusty brown head, and Emily shivered violently. "Well, I suppose it had to be. It's probably a good thing," she murmured.

"The best thing that's happened in Utah in years, Em," said Benny Blue.

"I'll go get our horses," Shelby said, grinning. "It's too far for an old geezer like Benny to walk."

"Better hunt up some spades and shovels too, son," said Benny.

"I'm goin' to wake Colfax up and let him do the diggin'," Shelby drawled. "I never did take to a shovel whatever." He went out smiling.

"Reckon we can make Black Jack talk when he comes to," Benny Blue said thoughtfully. "He's goin' to be real lonesome with them gun dogs of his gone."

"I'll make some coffee and fix something to eat, if you want it," Emily suggested, turning hopefully toward the kitchen.

"All right, Em," said Renner. He wasn't hungry, but he knew she needed something to do. "If he won't talk, Benny, we'll hold him until we draw out whoever's in with him."

"He'll talk, Mart," promised Benny. "I'll see to that, son."

Renner rubbed his brow. "I feel rotten, Ben."

"A man never feels too happy about killin', even when he knows he's done a good job," Benny Blue said. "But it had to be done, Mart, and it'll wear off in time—like any hangover. What we need right now is a damn good drink. Must be plenty of whiskey somewhere around this place."

But even with the whiskey burning away the rank powder taste and warming the hollowness inside him, Martin Renner felt let down and depressed. He had accomplished what he wanted to. Emily was safe in the kitchen, trying to forget recent horror in the housewifely routine of preparing food and coffee. Shelby and Benny were unhurt, satisfied to side him to the end. And the three dead men out front were no more than that dead dog in the back yard, were even less deserving of respect and consideration than the loyal animal. . . . But Renner could derive no sense of achievement or reward, no gratification from this.

Perhaps it would come later, after the reaction and shock

passed. He knew they were right and justified, and what they had done tonight was a service to the Dondrino, the entire Territory of Utah. But all he could think of was that he had killed two men in the last forty-eight hours, and would have to kill more before this was finished.

Renner held out his glass and watched the liquor flow into it from the bottle in Benny's gnarled steady hand.

"Bartender's holiday," Benny remarked wryly. "But I don't mind too much, Mart, as long as I can pour for myself too."

XI

THE next afternoon they started back into the south toward Brandvil. Emily Hale and Martin Renner rode ahead, followed by Benny Blue and Shelby on either side of Black Jack Herne, slumped in a despondent stupor and tied to his saddle. Herne hadn't recovered from his head injury enough to do any coherent talking, but there'd be plenty of time for that after they got him back to the Dondrino.

They had buried the three gunfighters and the dog in a common grave, and left Colfax and the extra horses behind at the ranch. Colfax, a bandage on his shaggy battered head, was still a sick man from the gun-whipping, in no shape to travel. They had got nothing out of Colfax either, but they concluded he wasn't important enough to bother with under the circumstances. They had Jack Herne, and one semi-invalid prisoner was sufficient to contend with on the long homeward trek. Herne might be faking to a certain extent, but the dull glazed look in his hooded eyes was genuine evidence that the man still suffered from those blows on the skull.

Emily had clubbed him with a piece of stovewood, and then Renner had clipped him with the gun barrel. Renner told Emily she had saved his life behind the log house, but Em declared the dog rated full credit, for taking those bullets that were meant for Martin.

"Then you both share in the dubious honor, Em," said Renner.

"Nothing dubious about it, Marty," protested the girl, her

golden-brown eyes solemn and warm on his lean profile. "But if the dog hadn't jumped you, I'd have been too late."

Renner smiled at her. "Your intentions were far better than the dog's though, Em." His melancholy of the night before had passed, as Benny had prophesied. Today Renner saw things in their true perspective.

In midafternoon heat the sky darkened and thunder rumbled in the distant mountains. A heavy oppressive stillness hung over the tableland, and the air turned a strange murky yellow color under lowering purpled clouds. The horses grew nervous, their hides bristling, and the cattle they saw showed the same symptoms. Renner began to search for shelter, recalling a line shack they had passed on their way north, somewhere in this general vicinity.

The wind had ceased entirely, and the leaves of cedars and junipers were unstirring, lifeless, in the ominous hushed silence. The saffron-stained atmosphere was charged with electricity, filled with swelling tension, as the storm gathered and built up and thunder muttered around faraway domes and peaks. The world seemed to wait breathlessly under the impending violence.

The riders as well as the horses felt the strain, and shrank inwardly from the overwhelming burden of eerie stillness and pent-up power suspended above the earth. Black Jack Herne started babbling and begging, until Shelby shook a sharp-knuckled fist in his plump face. The sky blackened, thunder rolled closer and louder, the yellowish light was tinged weirdly green and lavender, and the over-all pressure increased until it was difficult to breathe. Renner saw Emily wilting on her mount, and felt bowed and crushed in his own saddle.

At last Renner spotted the line shanty, sheltered in the lee of a pine-wooded ridge, and he pointed the little column in that direction.

When the storm finally broke, it was almost a relief at first. Lightning split the heavens with great forked flares of blinding green, blue and white, and the rain came in wind-lashed torrents. Thunder toppled and crashed in tremendous echoing volleys, that seemed to shake the earth to its foundations. Buffeted by rain and wind, the riders were instantly

drenched, water streaming down them and their horses as they plodded onward. The landscape was blotted out beneath this savage onslaught of the elements, visible only in vivid fleeting flashes.

The ridge was fairly close now, and they fought their way toward it through the whipping downpour. Lightning flamed in front of them, outlining one stricken pine in fire, and the concussion almost blew them from their saddles. The panicky broncs were hard to hold and manage in the weltering turmoil, and Shelby and Benny were having trouble with the terrified Herne and his mount. But they were nearly to the cabin. Renner pulled his bay over in front of Emily's horse, and led the way in to the bottom of the ridge.

Tethering the horses in the lean-to shed, they bucked the gale on foot and reached the shack, with Renner helping Emily, and Benny and Shelby hauling Herne in between them. Renner found a bransack to dry his hands on and lighted the lamp on the rude plank table. There was a stove and firewood, and he soon got a fire going. Herne had collapsed on one of the rope-slung bunks, and the others removed their soaked jackets and hats.

The wind tore at the log walls, and rain blew in through burlap covered windows. It wasn't much of a place, but it seemed like a secure and welcome refuge in this emergency. The stove heated quickly, spreading warmth into the single room, and Benny Blue produced a bottle he had brought along from Herne's supply at the ranch.

"Lucky I thought to fetch this medicine. We might all come down sick if I hadn't. First whiskey of Herne's I ever drank that wasn't cut. And it's on the house, folks."

Shelby laughed like a boy. "And this old coot's always claimin' he hates to tend bar."

"Son, this country was built on guts and whiskey and gunpowder," said Benny Blue. "That was one of Rawhide's sayin's and he was most generally correct."

They took turns drying out beside the hot stove and settled down to wait out the storm, which was already subsiding somewhat. Emily rested on the other bunk, while the men sat on boxes and passed the bottle around. Herne was a

sodden mass on his bed, oblivious to everything but his own misery.

Outside the thunder and lightning gradually receded, the wind and rain slackened, and the worst of it was over. But with the afternoon far gone, Renner decided they'd better stay overnight here. Benny and Shelby agreed, and went out to unsaddle the horses and bring in the wet leather gear, saddlebags and blanket rolls. With the smell of woodsmoke and drying wool, cigarettes and whiskey, the lamplit cabin took on a more cheerful aspect. If Herne hadn't been there, it would have been quite pleasant and homelike, Renner thought. But they needed Black Jack, of course, even though his presence was highly undesirable.

The rain had slowed to a steady thin patter when they heard soggy slurred hoofbeats, the neigh of horses, and then a brassy challenging voice: "Hallo, the cabin! We're coming in."

"Come ahead," Renner called, rising and trying his guns in the damp leather, while Benny turned on his crate to face the door, and Shelby crossed to wait on the other side of the entrance. Emily sat upright on the edge of her bunk, but Herne remained in a motionless huddle. "Open up, Shelby," said Renner. The boy did so and four men crowded inside, hats dripping and slickers shining wetly in the lamplight.

Renner recognized the two middle-aged men in front, ranchers who had always envied, hated and feared his father. Ivy Wingate, the spare hatchet-faced owner of the Running W, acid-mouthed beneath the drooping gray mustache. And Detwiler, broad, portly and sullen, the owner of Doubloon. The other two were younger but no less bleak and hostile, slickers drawn back to clear their gun handles.

"Making yourselves right at home, huh?" Wingate said, staring coldly from one to another, revealing some surprise at the sight of the girl. "Saw a couple of Mill Iron horses out there in the shed."

"Caught in that storm," Renner said mildly.

"What you doing up here anyway?" asked Wingate.

"Mindin' our own business, for one thing," young Shelby drawled, smiling and blue-eyed.

"Is that a fact?" Wingate said, with quiet contempt. "And

it requires wearing two guns, I see. Well, you happen to be on my range and in my line shack. And we've been losing a lot of beef lately."

Renner gestured at Shelby. "We're obliged for the shelter. On our way back to Brandvil."

"What did you come up here for?"

"Not to steal any stock," Renner said calmly.

Detwiler growled something and surged forward, but Wingate elbowed him back, saying, "You'd better answer questions straight and civil, mister. We've got a dozen more men down in the canyon, and they're in a mood for hanging somebody. Who's that on the bunk?"

"Black Jack Herne," said Renner. "Had a little trouble up at his spread. Three of his men dead and we're taking Jack into town."

"You aren't a lawman, are you?" Wingate squinted at him. "Damned if you don't look like a Renner."

"I am—Mart Renner."

"Heard you were back hurrahing around. You mean you boys shot up Herne's crew? We figured he might be hitched up with the rustlers. Followed a herd up here and got the cattle all right, but the thieves got away from us. Looked like some riders from Mill Iron, but we couldn't be sure."

"I'm sure enough, Ivy," declared Detwiler. "I know Mulcahy and Prager when I see 'em. It's Mill Iron runnin' off our stock." He glared at little Benny Blue, still sitting idly with thumbs in belt.

"I don't work for Mill Iron any more, Det," said Benny. "You've been in the Alhambra enough to know that."

"Could be workin' under cover for 'em," Detwiler muttered. "We better hold these fellas while we can, Ivy."

Renner laughed softly. "I've only been back in this country four days. And do you think we'd take a lady out rustling with us?"

"Just how does she fit in here, Renner?" demanded Wingate.

"Herne and his men carried her off, and we rode up here after them."

Detwiler scowled at Emily. "Ain't she one of Herne's—?"

"She's *my* girl," Renner cut in. "Going to be my wife—I hope."

Detwiler mumbled and made an awkward motion of apology.

One of the younger men said, "We ought to take Herne, at least. The boys sure want to stretch somebody's neck, and nobody'll miss Black Jack."

"Sure, let's take Herne and string him up," Detwiler agreed.

Renner shook his head slowly. "You can't have Herne. I want him myself."

"We've got enough men to take him, Renner," said Ivy Wingate.

"You won't have so many when you get through trying to," Renner told him easily.

Wingate eyed him with icy venom. "A chip off the old block, huh? They said you came home gun-slung and spoiling for trouble. I see they didn't lie any about you. Maybe you're tough, son, but you don't make the big tracks Rawhide did."

"I'm not trying to, 'Ivy," said Renner. "We don't want any trouble with your outfits. I think we're probably on the same side in this. Been trying to find out if Herne's tied up any way with Mill Iron. We saw evidence that Herne's been doing some rustling."

"Why don't you ask him?" jeered Detwiler.

"He doesn't feel good enough to talk—yet," Renner said. "He's a sick man today. Too many guns bent over his head last night. But he'll talk in town."

"We can check on them in Brandvil, Det," said Wingate. "This isn't getting us anywhere. I think Renner's telling the truth. One good trait in his family. . . . Let's cut for home before dark sets in."

"If you get anything on Mill Iron, I'll be glad to hear about it," Renner said.

Wingate nodded curtly, but Detwiler was still dissatisfied. "I think we're bein' foolish, lettin' 'em off like this, Ivy. We ought to—"

"Come on, Det, come on," rasped Wingate. "We've got nothing on them."

"You have no idea how smart you're being," Shelby drawled, with his most engaging grin, and the four cattlemen cast vicious glances at him from the doorway.

"You can use the cabin, Renner," said Wingate, grudgingly. "Can't turn you out with the girl and a man as bad off as Herne. See you in town and get a few things straightened out maybe."

"Thanks, Ivy," said Renner, with gentle irony. The door closed, and they heard the men mount and ride away in the dusky drizzle.

Benny Blue frowned dourly at Shelby. "You got a loose tongue, kid."

Shelby laughed "I like to give it to them big moguls. They're so used to trompin' over people, they can't hardly believe it when somebody chews back at 'em."

"You handled that pretty good, Mart," said Benny, caressing the bottle on the table. "We could of been in bad trouble right here."

"Wonder if Mill Iron's really running off their beef," Renner mused.

Benny drew the cork. "Since Rawhide went under, Mart, you can expect most anythin' in this country."

That evening Jack Herne recovered enough to sit up and eat some supper with them, and offer thanks for not turning him over to the ranchers' posse. But he wouldn't talk beyond that, except to deny everything they accused him of doing.

He'd had Renner beaten up at the Castle because Mart was nosing around and asking for it, but he knew nothing about the sniping attempts on Renner's life. Nor the burning of Sam Derry's gunshop. Nor the death of Rawhide.

Herne had no connection whatsoever with Dake Tirone and Mill Iron. He was ignorant of rustling activities on the plateaus, ran no stock on his spread, and had never heard of the Circle-H brand. On this excursion to the ranch, he and his men had no intention of harming Emily Hale. They just wanted to get away from town for a spell, and Mule Garay insisted on taking Emily because he was in love with her.

Benny Blue listened and snorted his disbelief. "You're so innocent, Jack, you make me feel guilty and wicked as all hell. Shut up until you're ready to spout some true facts

for us. And you're goin' to get truthful when we hit Brandvil, buster."

Black Jack Herne sank back on the bunk, tiny mouth compressed under the knobby nose, fat dimpled chin quivering. "I don't know how I can carry on with my three best men dead. Will you please give me a drink?"

"Waste liquor on you? Not by a damn sight!" said Shelby.

Martin Renner laughed. "Give him a small one, cut fifty-fifty with canteen water. That's the way Jack serves it in the Crystal Castle."

The rain had stopped, the weather cleared, and when Renner went out to grain the horses and get a breath of fresh air the moon was rising over the Continental Divide in Colorado and the sky was jeweled with constellations. The earth was washed clean and fragrant after the storm, and the vast endless wonder of it struck Renner as he stared across the broken tablelands from the Rockies in the east to the Wasatches on the west. The odor of pines and spruces mingled with the scent of wet grass and sage, and the bright sweeping expanse of the night was an awesome thing. Man was diminished to pinpoint obscurity in the grandeur of this great open country, with its sense of limitless space and distance.

He turned at a light footfall, and Emily Hale was there beside him, her rapt face lifted to the glory of the scene. "Isn't it beautiful, Marty?" she murmured, soft and husky. Renner nodded, his throat too full for words, and Emily leaned against him, her dark head barely above his broad shoulder. "Did you mean what you said in there, Mart?" she asked shyly.

"About what, Em?" he countered, with pretended vagueness.

"About me. About my being your girl and—" She faltered and couldn't go on.

"Worried, Em?" he teased gently.

"Worried that you didn't mean it," Emily said, with a low throaty laugh, gazing up at him with tilted eyes and eager mouth.

"But I did, Em." Renner turned and drew her close. "As soon as this is settled and over . . ." He bent his head until

his lips were on hers, and their bodies were locked tight and hard. The beauty of the rainwashed night shimmered about them with an even fuller sweetness and radiance.

XII

THEY were on the move soon after sunrise, the world sparkling new, shining bright and clean this morning after the storm, with the mists rising and thinning, the dew glittering on grass and leaves. The sun ascended the clean azure in the east, changing from red to gold with growing warmth. Fluffy white cumulus clouds banked the horizon, with delicate streamers of cirrus strung above them. The air was vibrant and sweet with springtime.

Herne, no longer tied in the saddle, rode morosely between Shelby and Benny at the front, with Emily and Renner in the rear today. Here and there sharp-profiled buttes and mesas jutted from the tabletop, the irregular surface of which was slashed with canyons and coulees. Cattle lowed mournfully and sheep bawled plaintively from far grasslands. The raucous chatter of magpies and the brisk tattooing of woodpeckers sounded from clumps of piñon and cedar. Geese honked northward in V formations, fleet trim chevrons against the brassy blue heavens. Herons flapped along the watercourses; eagles and hawks soared over the hills.

A wonderful morning to be alive on, Mart Renner thought. To breathe this pure upland air, and to see all the color and beauty spread for hundreds of miles on every side. Your girl beside you, a fine horse in under you, and two good comrades up ahead. To be alive and young and in love on such a day, big and strong enough to fight your enemies and face the world and the worst that fate could throw at you . . . It was enough for any man, and at twenty-six it seemed that it would go on forever. Death passed by close enough to touch and chill, but it couldn't happen to you. It was the others who died, never yourself. A man had to feel that way, in order to survive in this frontier land. A fighting man had to feel invincible, unconquerable, supreme.

They stopped at the little crossroads settlement known as

the Corner, and Emily waited with the horses in the shade of a board overhang while the men visited the saloon. Along the bar there was talk of horses, cows and sheep, the lightning bolt that had struck a homestead yesterday, the rustling that had shifted from the Sandstones up this way, a woman who was cheating on her husband.

A man said that Colorado had been admitted to the Union, but Utah would never get in on account of them goddam Mormons with all their wives. There was a discussion about the presidential candidates, Hayes and Tilden, and one speaker declared that anybody would be a hell of a lot better than "Useless" Grant. Another wondered if they'd ever get a railroad east of the Wasatches; the Union Pacific now traversed the western side of the Territory. Mention was made of the shooting of Wolf Leiken in Brandvil, and Renner felt his ears redden as Benny and Shelby grinned over their glasses at him.

Benny Blue prodded Herne into paying for the drinks, and they went back to Emily and the horses and rode on into the south.

"Mart's gettin' famous, Em," confided Benny. "They talk about him in barrooms, along with President Grant."

They paused at the abandoned Shelby place, and waited for the boy to pay his respects to his dead parents. Renner watched Herne for a hint of guilt or remorse, but Jack bared his head and bowed as impassively as the rest. Shelby stayed at the graves only a few minutes, and his sorrow rode with them as they pushed on once more. There's so little left after people die, Renner thought. It's almost as if they hadn't lived at all. Unless there's some kind of life after death, this existence isn't much more than an empty mockery, a joke. . . . But it was almost impossible for him to conceive of an afterlife, as much as he wished to believe in one.

But this was no day to dwell on death and the hereafter. This was a day for living, for drinking deeply of all the warmth and wonder of the earth in springtime. . . . Look at the girl by his side. There was a wealth of pleasure in just that. She was dressed like a man—tan riding pants, brown flannel shirt, yellow neckerchief, and hat—but she was all woman. All the lovely women in the world to him.

Erect and easy in the saddle, fully curved and firmly rounded in spite of her lithe slenderness, it was exciting to watch her riding astride, the depth at breast and hips, the grace of waist and thighs, accented by her position on the roan gelding. Renner wondered if it would be as perfect for them as it had been before. It should be even better in their maturity. He wanted her badly, almost unbearably, but he was trying to keep that controlled and in the background until the gunfighting was over and all his accounts settled in the Dondrino. This time they would do it right, make it legal, although a preacher couldn't make them any more married than they had been in their early-blooming first love.

They reached the southernmost plateau, and Shelby selected a well-defined trail that dipped and threaded downward past the sandstone cliffs and rocky terraces, dropping like a giant stairway of many brilliant colors toward the Dondrino Valley. In the afternoon sunlight the steep walls flared with fabulous tints, the reds running from bright vermilion to soft rose, purple shading through various blues into lavender, and smoky grays bleaching to pure whites. The trace was sharp and crooked, winding through stone corridors, descending on drifts of gravel and talus, one terraced step after another. In places overhanging rims nearly shut out the sky; in others the full glare of the sun fell on the riders and the salt-rimed horses.

Renner thought of Cynthia, the young blonde widow, and spat aside. Rawhide must have declined in his latter years, to be taken in by a woman like that. Under the queenly bearing, she was just a common and wanton slut. He was certain that Dake Tirone was her lover—one of them, at least. Renner still hoped to unearth a link between that couple and Herne. Some grounds on which he could move against them, blast Tirone off Mill Iron and chase Cynthia out of that house in town. Renner wasn't particularly greedy for wealth, but he hated to see his father's fortune in the grasp of that pair.

They were in a deep narrow passage now, barely wide enough for two horses abreast, with eroded sandstone walls rising sheer on either side. Jack Herne was at the point, with Benny and Shelby close behind him, while Emily and

Renner rode in the rear. An ideal spot for an ambush, Renner thought, with an uneasy glance up the towering cliffs. Along the top rims in places boulders were balanced precariously, and the rock faces were scarred and gouged from previous slides. This could be a deathtrap and no mistake. But don't get morbid, boy, he told himself silently.

Renner glanced at the straight proud-breasted figure of the girl. Emily should be the mistress of Mill Iron, his wife and working partner on that great ranch. She had the real class and natural quality that Cynthia pretended to possess. And they'd have Mill Iron now, if Renner had stayed home and married Em and proved up to Rawhide. . . . But that old opportunity was long gone. The thing to do was make a new one and take advantage of it this time. Right now though he wanted to get out of this narrow sunken defile.

It came with shocking suddenness and a heavy rushing roar, as if the entire right-hand wall was falling. A huge boulder plunged from the rim, loosening lesser chunks and growing into an avalanche, hurtling downward at the five riders with thunderous speed. Dust smoked and boiled upward, shutting out the sunshine, and the horses pitched and whirled in a frenzy of terror. Renner brought his bay around and crowded Emily's roan back uptrail, the only chance for them.

Herne's chestnut had bolted straight ahead with panic, and Black Jack nearly lost his seat in the abrupt flight. Benny's grullo and Shelby's black were tangled up together, rearing, snorting and pawing the air. When they fought the bronses down into control, it was too late to take after Herne. They had to pull back, in order to escape the brunt of the rock-slide. It was close then. Benny and Shelby were pelted with pebbles and dirt, as they wheeled their mounts and fled after Renner and Emily.

The slide surged to the bottom with a shattering smash that made the earth shudder, burying the trail beneath tons of jagged sandstone, piling up higher and higher in the cut. Dust and powdered rock clouded densely on the air, billowing dark and thick. Herne was cut off from the rest of them, freed by a freak of fortune, safe on the down-mountain side of the blockade. The others would have to turn back and

climb to the next terrace and pick a new route from there. Jack Herne was as free as the wind, and he'd be miles away before they could circle and cross his tracks.

Then the rifle fire broke out on the rimrock, muzzle flames lacing the murky haze, reports crashing from wall to wall, and they knew that the landslide hadn't been accidental. Renner drove Emily's roan on ahead, with shots ricocheting and screeching about them, and Shelby and Benny came up behind Renner, crouched low in their saddles under the searching lash of lead.

Renner lifted his carbine from the boot and levered in a shell, marveling at how the marksmen above could be missing when they were like fish in a dry barrel. But the snipers couldn't see them through the boiling dirt and stone dust. Renner slashed his reins across the roan's rump, and started firing almost straight up at the winking red lights along the rim. Shelby and Benny were shooting with him, working triggers and levers swiftly to drive the enemy back from the lip of the gorge, and the rifles slacked off at the top.

A bend in the corridor brought temporary security, but they had to keep riding hard, for the men up there would follow them along the heights, and once away from the slide visibility would clear. "Keep going, Eml" yelled Renner. "Ride for it!" They put their horses up the grade at a killing pace, the clatter of hoofs loud between the confining cliffs, and the men on the rough craggy summit could not match this rate of speed. The shooting was well behind them now, the bullets snarling and howling off rock surfaces and scattering showers of stone splinters and dust. But the horses were climbing in long reaching strides, grunting and foaming wet from their efforts, and another bend in the walls afforded a measure of real safety.

"Who the hell's up there anyway?" grumbled Benny Blue, without expecting any answer.

"We ought to get shot for lettin' Herne bust loose," Shelby said in disgust, as they reloaded their carbines.

"Couldn't be helped," Renner said. "Catch up with him later on. It's lucky any of us got out of that one."

They could only guess as to the identity of their assailants. It might be someone coming to Herne's assistance, or

somebody else bent on wiping them all out. The unknown rustlers . . . Gunmen from Mill Iron or from the Castle . . . Cowboys riding for Detwiler and Wingate . . . Whoever it was had stalked them well, plotted their course nicely, and timed the attack almost to perfection. Actually to perfection, if the intent was to rescue Herne rather than obliterate the whole party. Whether intentional or not, the escape of Black Jack Herne had been effected.

Emerging on a broad terrace in the shadow of a chalky cliff stained with ocher and crimson, they halted to rest the lathered blowing horses, the enemy riflemen left well out of sight by this time. Renner didn't expect any more trouble from that quarter. There hadn't been more than three or four men on the rimrock, and he doubted if they'd care to shoot it out on equal terms.

"What now, Mart?" asked Benny, biting off a fresh chew of tobacco.

Renner drank from his canteen, and waved toward the boulders tumbled at the base of the cliff. "Hole up here and rest and see what happens. Don't think they'll follow up, but if they do we'll be ready." He sloshed a little water on his sweaty grimed face and smiled at the girl. "You stand it all right, Em?"

"Just scared to death, that's all," Emily said, blowing perspiration from her upper lip, as they led the mounts into sheltering rocks.

"Hope they do come after us," Shelby said, his teeth flashing white in his blackened dripping face. "Like to get a good look at 'em in my gun sights."

"Yeah, I'd like to see who they are," Renner said, "and find out if they meant to spring Herne loose, or just wanted to massacre all of us down there."

"They won't come," Benny Blue predicted. "If they're for Herne, they'll be joinin' up with him. If they ain't, they'll just pull out. Coyotes like them ain't got the stomach for a stand-up fight."

"I wonder if it's worth our time to pick up Herne's trace?" Renner said, with a thoughtful frown.

"I'd say so, Mart," said Benny, his faded eyes very light in his dirty gaunt features. "Ought to find out where he

runs to, and who he's runnin' with. We need that fat little jasper."

"Guess you're right, Ben," conceded Renner. "If there's no more shooting here, we'd better split up. Shelby can take Emily into town, and you and I'll go after Herne."

Shelby looked unhappy, and Emily laughed softly at him. "You don't seem very eager to serve as my escort, Shelby."

"Rather escort you than any other gal I know—and I like gals," Shelby said. "But when there's fightin' to be done, I like to be there, Emily."

"Won't be any fighting, Shelby," said Renner. "Just a lot of tiresome tracking for Benny to do."

"All right, I'm resigned to my fate." Shelby laughed and winked a blue eye at Emily. "But don't blame me, Marty, if your girl never looks kindly at you again! . . . And we'll probably catch Jack in Brandvil, while you're out beatin' the brush."

"Could be," Renner admitted, smiling. "If you do catch him, keep him alive, Shelby. And Em, you'd better stay at Doc Seabrey's or Guy Ormond's until things quiet down."

Emily nodded. "I know Doc better than I do Mr. Ormond. I'll stay there, if you don't want me in my place."

"Safer, Em," said Martin Renner. "We'll meet you folks in town as soon as we can."

Shelby grinned. "Don't be too long, or you'll be losin' your gal for sure, Marty."

"If you were anything but a button, I might worry some," Renner kidded back.

Shelby laughed, with a gay toss of his curly black head. "A button in years maybe, but old and wicked and wise in the ways of women."

They loosened their double-rig saddles and walked the horses around in the shade to cool them out, watching and waiting until it was evident that the enemy had moved out and away. Tightening the cinches and mounting up, they located another downward trail, skirting the palisades instead of following a chassu through them.

On the terrace below the blockaded passage they parted, Emily and Shelby continuing on down the slopes toward Brandvil, while Renner and Blue turned off to hunt for

Herne's sign at the lower mouth of the corridor in which they had been attacked. The flinty terrain made tracking difficult, impossible save for an expert, but Benny Blue was up to it and soon on the trace, unerring as a bloodhound on the scent.

The tracks of three other horsemen joined Herne's, and they all went on together, eastward along a broad shelf with one pink-tinted cliff rising on the left and a sheer orange-hued wall dropping on the right. Renner couldn't make much out of the faint signs, but Benny read them like printed pages.

"So them three bushwhackers was bent on pryin' Jack loose," Benny Blue said. "The method they used could of killed him along with us. Maybe they didn't care, so long as Herne wasn't left to talk to us."

"A good thing for us they counted so much on that rock-slide," said Renner. "If they'd used rifles in the beginning, we'd all be laying back there in the pass."

"I didn't figure Herne had three more gunnies who'd come up here and pull him out of a tight spot."

"Maybe they aren't his men, Benny. Could be Detwiler and Wingate, still wanting somebody to hang."

Benny splashed tobacco juice over the rocks. "The tracks would tell us, Mart. But it's goin' to get dark before we can run 'em down."

The trail continued eastward toward the Taloncillos, dipping and rising along terraces between the stepped cliffs, until the sandstone walls were left behind at last and the terrain changed to rolling timbered hills.

In the waning light of late afternoon, the tracks veered southward, well to the east of Brandvil, in the general direction of Sangaree Swamp, the Little Don River, and Mill Iron. Benny scowled into the premature greenish twilight of the woods.

"Won't be able to follow this much farther, Mart."

"Maybe this is a good time to visit Mill Iron, Ben," said Martín Renner. "Long as we're headed in that way."

"Why not, son?" Benny Blue said. "It used to be home to both of us."

XIII

THE LIGHTS of Mill Iron, scattered on the wide bluff above the Little Don, looked like the nighttime glow of a small settlement. Renner drew rein and stared at the old familiar scene with sorrow and loneliness. This, more than the house in town, had been his home. Too weak for Rawhide to waste time on, too young to be a close comrade of Doak, he hadn't been particularly happy here. Still it was home and all the time-mellowed memories came back in a flood, richer and dearer than the reality, clutching at his throat, making his eyes smart and his spine tingle.

The full impact of his father's death seemed to strike him for the first time. Here Rawhide had ruled absolutely supreme, a mighty but roughly benevolent monarch, a giant who made big tracks and cast a long shadow over the entire Dondrino country. Rawhide Renner had fought Indians and Mexicans, outlaws and renegades, to tame this frontier and build his ranch. Now a sleek poised stranger with Eastern manners and clothes stood in his place—Dake Tirone, fronting for that blonde strumpet in Brandvil. With a gun packed by Pat Mulcahy and Cactus Prager. And Coke Tansill, up from the Rio Grande on Mart Renner's trail.

"It ain't changed much—in looks," Benny Blue said softly. "But the heart's sure gone out of it, boy."

"I kind of hate to go in there, Benny," said Renner.

"We don't have to, Mart. If Herne's there—or they're in with him—they could cut us down pretty easy."

Renner sat still in his saddle, staring at the extensive layout. Herne wouldn't come to Mill Iron on his own, knowing that he'd be followed. But if he'd been picked up by Mill Iron riders, they might have brought him in for safekeeping.

"We'll go in anyway, Ben," said Renner, and they dropped from the foothills into the valley, their horses jaded and slow, the men cramped and weary.

The large square fieldstone ranch house faced the river, a porch across the front, alders and cottonwoods shading

the yard. In the background were the barns, corrals and sheds, bunkhouse, cookshack and blacksmith shop. A store and a row of frame houses stood apart, built by Rawhide for his old employees with families, so that it did resemble a little community. Everything looked the same, yet there was a difference. An emptiness with Rawhide gone. All the Renners gone except Martin, and he no longer had a place here.

The front of the big house was dark, and they rode around back and saw the lighted windows of the office. Guitar music and singing voices issued from the long bunkhouse, and the clanging of iron came from the blacksmith's where a forge flared cherry-red. There was some activity in the stable and the main barn. Insects buzzed around lamplit windows and doors, and formed humming clouds around the lamp posts that illuminated the spacious area between house and out-buildings.

Renner and Blue swung down and tied up at the hitch-rail, and Dake Tirone appeared in the office doorway. He wore a pleated white shirt, open at the throat, and a gun belt slung against black trousers. He was as darkly handsome and refined as Renner remembered, and the groomed elegance was there even when he dressed casually for comfort. His crisp black hair gleamed in the light, and his smile was gracious and friendly, as he said:

"Why hello, Benny. And Martin. Glad to see you both. Come in."

The office was cleaner than Renner had ever seen it, and the furnishings were new, which came as a relief to him. He didn't want to see Tirone or any other man sitting in Rawhide's old chair at the ancient battered desk. Exchanging greetings they paced about to limber their saddle-stiffened bodies, while Tirone lounged on the edge of his flat desk and poured whiskey into three glasses. They said they weren't hungry, in response to his polite query; the drinks were more welcome than food.

"I guess I should have recognized you that day on the stagecoach, Martin," said Tirone. "Must have been too pre-occupied to be observant. But perhaps you weren't anxious to be recognized?"

"Thought I was going to surprise my father," Renner drawled.

"So, you actually didn't know he was dead?"

"That's right."

"Must have been quite a shock."

"It was."

Dake Tirone nodded, with precisely the right degree of sympathy and understanding. "He was as nearly immortal as any man I've ever known, Martin. I feel fortunate indeed to have known him, worked for him—and to have been his friend. A great man. And his passing was a terrible loss to this country."

Renner said nothing. There was nothing to fight here. This man was too smart, too polished and slick and suave. And tough underneath the debonair surface, like the finest tempered steel in a silken sheath.

"I've been hearing a good deal about you, Martin," Tirone went on. "Perhaps it's presumptuous of me to offer you employment, but a man like you can always command top wages on Mill Iron. Naturally I don't mean merely a riding job . . ."

"Too busy to think about working," Renner said.

"Yes, I understand you've been busy. And that you think your father was murdered."

"Don't you?"

Tirone was only a trifle startled. "There was no evidence of it. It was a closed case—until you came back. Do you think you're justified in starting a war over it, Martin?"

"Yes, I do," Renner said flatly. "Has Jack Herne been here?"

Tirone's cool answer was a total surprise. "Why, yes, he was here. Rode in with three of his men, in rather bad shape. Said three others had been killed up on the tablelands, and he'd barely escaped himself."

"Are they still here?"

"No, they went on into town."

"Why did Herne come here anyway?"

"Because his flight led him this way, I suppose." Dake Tirone smiled and gestured. "But why should I have to stand this inquisition? Who are you to cross-examine me, Martin?"

His voice was calm and even, but there was anger in him—and menace.

"Sorry," Renner said. "I just want Herne so bad—"

"The man's terrified all right," Tirone said. "He says you're kill-crazy, Martin. And I must admit it begins to look that way."

Martin Renner laughed. "Because I killed Wolf Leiken? He shot my brother ten years ago, and he was out to get me the same way. Because I went after Herne and his gunmen? After they beat me up and carried off my girl? Maybe he didn't tell you everything, Tirone."

"I don't suppose he did. Herne implied that you were bent on wiping out his whole outfit, for no reason at all. I'm glad to learn that you do have authentic reasons, Martin. But I still cannot uphold this wholesale killing."

"What are you going to do when they come at you with a gun? Or run off with the girl you want to marry?"

Tirone shook his glossy black head. "I don't know, Martin. It's a shame this land remains so wild and lawless and uncivilized. But it was peaceful until your return . . ."

"All right, I'm to blame for it then," Renner said, and turned to Benny Blue. "We'd better be getting along, Ben."

"You're both welcome to stay here, if you want to."

"No, thanks. We've got too much to do."

Tirone sighed. "So you're going on with it, Martin?"

"I'm going to have a talk with Jack Herne," said Renner. "I don't intend to kill him. Unless I find out that he was in on my father's death."

"You can't fight and kill everyone in this valley, my friend," protested Dake Tirone. "Don't you see how futile and pointless this whole project is? You'll just get yourself—and your friends—killed, sooner or later." There was a subtle warning in his tone.

Renner looked straight at him, with gray eyes gone green. "You've got a new hand named Coke Tansill. He followed me up here from Mexico, and he'll be coming after me with a gun. When he does I'll kill him. You can tell him that, Tirone."

Dake Tirone sighed again. "I don't know what you're trying to prove, boy. I've seen my share of tough ones, but

none of them was bulletproof. I don't imagine you're an exception either. A man with your attitude doesn't live long in any frontier country. I wish you'd listen to reason, draw the sizable settlement that's coming to you, and move out of the Dondrino—before you die here."

"Thanks for the advice," Renner said gravely. "But I've got a few things to do yet before I pull out."

"Well, don't be looking for trouble from Mulcahy or Prager or any of my men," Tirone said. "I told them to leave you alone. I hope you don't make me rescind that order."

"I won't," Renner promised readily. "I've got enough troubles without hunting up any extra. . . . Thanks for the drink. Come on, Benny."

When they went out, Tirone trailing after them, a man was crossing the back yard toward the office, and Renner caught something familiar in the set of his head and shoulders, the swing of the arms and legs. A lean wiry man with a keen triangular face, sharp features, a jaunty insolence about him, his gun worn low in a tied-down holster. He saw Renner then and stopped short in an easy half-crouch, elbows out a bit, right hand spread-fingered, eyes and mouth contemptuous and mocking. Tawny blond hair shone pale under his rakish hat.

"*Tansill!*" called Dake Tirone. "None of that here. I told you, man!"

"I ain't gunnin' for Renner," Coke Tansill said, drawling lazily. "Thought he might throw down on me is all . . . Honest, Mart, I didn't track you up here. Just wanted to see if this country was as wonderful as you bragged it up."

"You're a liar, Coke," said Renner mildly. "But it can wait till I see you in town—or somewhere else."

"On the level, Mart, that's all over and done with," Tansill insisted, soft and slurred. "I ain't carryin' a grudge. It's buried down there in Chihuahua with them boys of mine you shot up—and Glenway."

"You sent Joffey after me."

"No, I didn't. Joff went on his own hook. And got a busted skull for it, I heard back down the line. I'm willin' to call it quits, Mart."

"All right, Coke," said Renner. "Until you change your mind."

"I ain't changin' it, Mart," said Coke Tansill. "I got a bellyful of gunpowder down below the Rio Grande."

Dake Tirone spoke then: "You see, Martin? All this is in your mind, of your own making. You're trying to carry on a one-man war. Relax and cool off and let us have peace and quiet here."

"You've got me wrong, Tirone," said Renner. "I never reach until I'm called. Your peace and quiet will come—in time."

He stepped up onto the bay and Benny mounted his grullo, and they rode out of Mill Iron along the road toward the main highway and Brandvil.

"What do you think, Mart?" asked Benny Blue.

"Too much sweetness and light in there for me to swallow. That Tansill came up here to shoot me, and he'll make his play when the time comes."

"I almost swallowed my glass when Tirone said sure, Herne had been there. Course he might of figured we'd tracked 'em closer and *knew* they headed into Mill Iron."

Renner nodded. "Also it might have been three of Tirone's riders with Herne. And Jack could still be hidden out there, for all we know."

"I thought of them things too," Benny said. "But we couldn't do a hell of a lot about it, at the moment."

"Can't get anywhere talking to that Tirone."

"Slicker'n grease," Benny Blue agreed. "But if he's a real bad one, Mart, if he's really mixed up in this with Herne—how come old Rawhide put so much stock in him?"

"I don't know, Benny," murmured Martin Renner. "But I know Rawhide was wrong about the woman he married for his second wife. So he could have read the wrong brand on the man he put to running his ranch."

"It follows. I suppose everythin' does. But all it seems to lead us in is a big fat circle goin' nowhere."

"We've got to get hold of Herne again. Or see who's trying to keep us off Herne. Somebody'll have to show their hand before long in this game."

"I sure hope so," Benny said. "I don't mind fightin' somethin' I can see in front of me."

They splashed across the ford in the Little Don, running high after the rain, and before them lay the dark mysterious wastes of Sangaree Swamp, sunken and gloomy and mist-shrouded in the moonlit night. Somewhere between the river and the swampland, Rawhide Renner had died.

Turning left they followed the wagon road south toward the stage station on the main thoroughfare that led westward into town. It seemed as if they had been riding and fighting for days and nights on end, and the future held more and worse of the same.

Renner's scarred face itched and burned under the beard stubble, trail dirt and dried sweat. His eyes ached dully and his rangy frame was racked by the slow motion of the easy-gaited bay. . . . I've sure been neglecting good old Guy Ormond and Doc Seabrey too, he thought. But it can't be helped. Things have been happening too fast. Maybe after this is settled I can spend some time with them . . . If we ever get the real enemy out in the open where we can settle it.

XIV

DR. SEABREY, a bulky man with the shoulders of a bulldogger, the brutal face and hands of a prize fighter, had the softest of eyes and voices, the feather-light touch of a woman. He welcomed Emily Hale and Shelby, listened with interest to their story, and insisted on Shelby's staying for supper with them. A bachelor, Doc lived with a Chinese cook and servant known as Yam, in a rambling frame house west of the central square of Brandvil, the nearest thing to a hospital in the Dondrino.

Seabrey was pleased to have company, delighted to put Emily up for as long as she wished. "The only time I've seen that boy Marty he was unconscious," Doc complained. . . . While Emily bathed in her room, Shelby scrubbed up and shaved with one of Doc's razors. Seabrey had a way of mak-

ing you feel perfectly comfortable and at home. It was a good feeling, Shelby thought, after living in saloons and cheap hotels and boarding places. Or sleeping on the floor in Benny's room.

Martin Renner's home-coming had brought a change to Shelby. After Pop was shot and Ma died, Shelby had let go and drifted loosely in an alcoholic haze, lucky enough at gambling to keep himself in whiskey and women. Now he had something to live for again, to work for with Mart Renner and Benny Blue. The same outfit had killed both his father and old Rawhide, a little two-bit rancher and the biggest cattleman in the valley. Jack Herne was involved in the deal, but there was somebody bigger and stronger behind him.

Shelby combed his glistening dark curls and studied his shining clean features in the mirror. Wasting your time with honkytonk tramps, he thought scornfully. Why don't you get yourself a girl like Emily Hale? But there aren't many like her around, that's for sure. . . . He thought of Emily with warmth and tenderness. With desire too, although he wouldn't admit it. Because she was Mart Renner's girl, and he liked Mart better than any man he had ever known. Mart and that tough sour-mouthed little stinging hornet of a Benny Blue. There were two men to ride the river with, and no mistake.

Supper was pleasant with Yam serving and Doc the charming host, and Emily tired but lovely in the lamplight. Shelby kept them laughing part of the time, with self-derogatory tales of his misadventures in the barrooms and gambling joints and dance halls. But underneath the light talk and laughter, they were all thinking and worrying about Renner and Benny, and wondering where Herne's tracks had led them.

"Can I borrow one of your saddle broncs, Doc?" asked Shelby, the long cigar Seabrey had given him incongruous in his fine boyish face. "Want to scout around some, and too lazy to walk. Our horses got a rest comin'."

"Certainly, Shelby," said Seabrey. "The buckskin needs exercise. But you'd better not travel too far until you hear from Mart and Ben."

"I'll just drift around town a little, Doc. And thanks a lot, Doc."

Shelby said so long to them, strapped on his guns, and put on hat and jacket. Out back in the stable, where he had rubbed down, grained and stalled his black and Emily's roan, Shelby threw his saddle gear onto Seabrey's buckskin. The horse was frisky and exploded into lively bucking in the yard, but Shelby soon had his head up and his antics calmed.

He turned out toward the Crystal Castle on the western outskirts, with no definite course of action in mind. Halfway there he saw a pair of riders in the street ahead, and his heart went up as he recognized the plump shapeless form of Black Jack Herne. This was almost too good to be true. The other man was a deputy sheriff named Ushkow, the hulking strong boy of Abel Sullers's force. So Herne had run to the law for protection, and Sullers being what he was had given it to him.

If Herne got to the Castle, it would be one hell of a job to dig him out of there. Even with Garay and Elgart and Webley dead, Black Jack had enough gunhands left to make the Castle an impregnable fortress. Maybe they weren't as skilled and loyal as the top three had been, but they made up in numbers what they lacked in quality. Shelby knew he had to snatch Herne right here and now, regardless of the deputy, and hold him somewhere until Renner and Blue arrived. The opportunity was too good to pass up, even if it meant crossing the law. And Shelby had little or no respect for Abel Sullers's brand of law anyway. About all Abe ever did was lock up down-and-out derelicts and Saturday night drunks.

Shelby pulled down his hatbrim and lifted the buckskin forward, glad that he had switched horses. Herne and Ushkow glanced back, but took no alarm. Closing up on them, Shelby drew his right-hand Colt and kneed his mount to the deputy's side, at the left of Herne. The street, well away from the center of town, was dark and quiet except for the slow clopping hoofbeats. Lights from houses flickered through cottonwood boughs along the way, and dust floated on the night breeze.

Ushkow turned and peered as Shelby came alongside, and

Herne hunched forward to try and see around the deputy's blocky hulk. Sullen and suspicious, Ushkow was grabbing for his holster when Shelby leaned out lithely and chopped hard with the gun barrel. The crushing stroke bowed Ushkow over his pommel and spilled him heavily into the clouding gravel, where he sprawled without stirring.

Herne yelled, "Shelby!" and put spurs to his mount, and Ushkow's rearing plunging horse barred Shelby's way momentarily. Pulling clear and booting the buckskin forward, Shelby sheathed his gun and shook out his rope in the wake of Herne's frenzied flight. Spinning a loop on the dead run, Shelby made his cast and saw it settle cleanly about the man ahead. Taking a turn on the horn, Shelby pulled the buckskin to a skidding stop, and Jack Herne was jerked bodily out of the saddle to bounce and roll in the dirt, while his panicked horse kept on at a runaway gallop.

Swinging down into the swirling dust, Shelby found Herne senseless from the jarring force of his fall. With a quick powerful heave, exerting all the trained strength in his lean hard body, Shelby hoisted the fat little man across the buckskin's back in front of the pommel. Climbing aboard himself Shelby put the horse into a swift run, turning off at the next corner and debating where to lodge his prisoner.

He thought of Emily's cabin. But no, that was too near the Castle, too far out of town. He decided against Doc Seabrey's too, and then he remembered Benny Blue's room over the Alhambra. There was an outside stairway at the rear of the saloon. He could double around by back streets and alleys, drag Herne upstairs and deposit him in Benny's room. The doors were never locked there. Shelby had spent many a drunken night in that sanctuary.

So I'm nothing but a button, am I? he thought with boyish exultation, visualizing the surprise and pleasure of his comrades. You wise old men ride your butts off hell-and-gone all over the hills, while I ease into town with a pretty gal and eat supper like a gentleman. Then go out and pick up Black Jack Herne nonchalant-like, simple as picking a glass of redeye off the bar and just as much fun. Maybe I was kind of lucky, but it's a good man who can take advantage and push his luck.

Shelby rode a circuitous back route toward the square, and when people stared curiously at the burden across his horse, he laughed and wagged his head, saying, "Drunk again, folks. Poor fella just can't hold his liquor."

Hope they haven't fired Benny and thrown him out of that room, Shelby mused. The little old leatherhead hasn't done hardly a lick of work since Marty got back here. He's getting to be as unemployed as I am . . . but they wouldn't let Benny Blue go. He's too good a bartender, just like he used to be the best bronc peeler in these parts. And he sure can keep order in a saloon, that stringy little strip of rawhide, with his white head and face homely enough to stampe a herd of milk cows, and his heart bigger than all of Utah.

If Ushkow had recognized him, Shelby would have to dodge the law for a spell, but that wasn't too difficult in Brandvil as long as a man didn't get falling-down drunk. . . . The main thing was he had Black Jack Herne back in the bag where they wanted him, and now they could sit back and see who would try to come and rescue the worthless bastard.

An hour later, with Herne securely bound, gagged and locked in Benny's room upstairs, Shelby was lounging idly over a drink at the Alhambra bar. He had gone back to check at Doc Seabrey's, but Renner and Blue weren't in yet. Emily Hale, worn out from her long ordeal on the plateaus, had taken the sedative Doc prescribed and gone to bed.

Shelby finished his drink and started to leave, thinking it would be smarter and safer for him to lay low and keep out of sight. The batwing doors flapped inward and Abe Sullers entered with drawn gun, four deputies filing in after him and fanning out on either side, their pistols lined on Shelby. One of them was Ushkow, a crude bloody bandage on his hatless head, a murderous look on his flat ugly features.

"That's him," Ushkow grated, and Sullers said, "Get 'em up, Shelby, and keep 'em up."

Shelby grinned and raised his hands slowly. "You sure you got enough help, Abe? Maybe you ought to call out the cavalry."

"You're a real funny boy," Sullers said. "Maybe you can

laugh off a murder charge. And assault with intent to kill, on a peace officer. Get his guns, one of you."

A deputy stepped carefully around behind Shelby and took the guns from his holsters, prodding Shelby forward. There was a gasp of protest then, as Ushkow moved in snarling and struck savagely with his gun barrel. Shelby crumpled on jacking knees and fell forward into the sawdust. An angry sound came from the onlookers, dying out under the muzzles of the sheriff and his men.

"I owed the sonofabitch that one," Ushkow growled, touching his own bandaged skull.

"Pick him up and carry him out," Sullers directed, and two deputies lifted Shelby between them and dragged him out through the swing-doors.

"Too bad Benny Blue wasn't here to take that shotgun to 'em," someone muttered, as Abe Sullers followed his crew outside.

Doc Seabrey, summoned to the jailhouse to attend to an injured prisoner, was not unduly surprised to find the patient was young Shelby. Doc called for a bucket of water and turned to Sheriff Sullers. "What's the kid in for, Abe? Drunk again?"

"A little more serious than that, Doc. Murder this time." "Who did he kill?"

"He was in on the killing of three men," Sullers said. "Spider Webley and Pine Elgart and Mule Garay."

Seabrey laughed aloud. "How long since it's been murder to kill skunks, Abe?"

"Skunks or whatever, this killing's got to stop, Doc," declared Sullers.

Seabrey bathed the gashed swollen scalp wound, and made a slow thorough examination. "This boy's hurt bad, Abe," he said, at length. "His skull is fractured, depressed onto the brain. Have to operate and relieve that pressure, if he's to live."

"Go ahead then."

"Can't do it here, Abe. Have to take him to my place."

Sullers frowned fretfully. "All right, I suppose we can move him out there."

"Rig up a stretcher of some kind. He's got to be handled with care."

Abe Sullers swore. "Don't hardly seem worth the bother, when he's going to hang anyway."

Seabrey looked at him, straight and deep. "I don't think you mean that, Abe. I hope you don't anyway. . . . Get a litter ready now."

"You're going to be held responsible for this kid, Doc. Don't forget that."

"Naturally I'll assume full responsibility for him," Seabrey said somberly. "But I can't guarantee he'll live—to hang. It's a very delicate operation."

"Just so he don't get away from you," Abe Sullers said, flicking his neat mustache. "If he lives I'll guarantee that he hangs. The law's been made a laughingstock long enough in the Dondrino."

In the adjacent office, Sullers was berating Ushkow for knocking Shelby out, so that it was impossible for the boy to tell them where Herne was, when two other deputies returned with a stretcher from the undertaker's. They were accompanied by two eminent businessmen: Clyde Voorhees, who conducted the furniture store and undertaking business, and Lute Kemper, owner of the largest general merchandise.

"Congratulations on capturing Shelby, Abe," wheezed Kemper, a bloated overfed-looking personage with a pompous air.

"When are you going to get young Renner and old man Blue?" asked Voorhees, a shrunk, emaciated, bloodless man, who resembled a cadaver more than did the majority of corpses he prepared for burial.

"We'll catch up with them in due time," Sullers said, inclining his head toward the cell block. "Dr. Seabrey's in there with the prisoner."

Seabrey appeared behind the stretcher-bearing deputies, warning them to be very gentle in carrying the unconscious patient. He turned his rugged roughhewn face to the visitors, and said in that soft voice, "Gentlemen. I didn't know you were so concerned over the welfare of Black Jack Herne."

"It's not that at all, and you know it," blustered Lute

Kemper. "It's just that Clyde and I want law and order in this town, and by the Almighty we're going to have it!"

Seabrey smiled dimly. "When Jack Herne and his hired gunmen are considered to be on the side of law and order, it makes a man wonder."

"Who said anything about Jack Herne anyway?" sputtered Voorhees.

"If you're against Renner and Blue and Shelby, you're for Jack Herne and his kind," Doc Seabrey said. "Have you many coffins on hand, Clyde? There's liable to be a sudden demand for them in the near future." With a careless half-salute, he followed the stretcher out into the street.

Kemper wheeled ponderously on the sheriff. "Better keep an eye on him and young Shelby, Abel."

Sullers gestured with annoyance. "You tend to your business and I'll run this office. That kid won't be running far with a broken head. Watch the office, Ushkow." He stepped outside and strode after the small procession, wondering how any man could be fool enough to want the job of sheriff, not to mention holding it all these years.

"Congratulations on capturing Shelby!" repeated Sullers, spitting with explosive disgust. Five men with the drop on one kid, and then that stupid ox of an Ushkow had to beat the boy over the head. . . . When Mart Renner and Benny Blue got back in town, Sullers wouldn't be able to find a single one of his brave goddamn deputies anywhere. But why should he care, one way or another? He didn't have any stake in this muddled-up mess, and he was sick of taking orders from all sides.

To hell with it, Sullers thought. I don't care where Herne is. I wish he was dead and buried up there with his three strutting gunnies. . . . Sullers resolved to slip out to the Castle, get a bottle and that fiery little half-Mex girl and forget about everything else. Overnight, anyhow.

XV

IT was another night in Brandvil, and counting back Renner discovered that it was his seventh night back here in the Dondrino. It seemed a great deal longer than that, so much life—and death—had been crammed into that one week.

He and Benny were sitting in that room over the Alhambra, and Jack Herne was stretched on the bed, untied and ungagged but helpless in his utter misery and despair. A far cry from the sleek superior Black Jack whom Renner had seen in the office at the Crystal Castle. Now Herne's clothes were filthy and tattered, smeared with blood and dirt. His pale face had been burned raw by sun and wind, the bulbous nose flaked and peeling, the thin lips chapped and split. A ragged beard sprouted from the plump cheeks and jowls, and his long hair was matted and awry.

Herne's head ached, his soft body was saddle-galled, bruised and beaten, and he was a thoroughly sick, frightened and dejected little man. But he hadn't talked yet. Not enough to amount to anything. And it began to look as if he wasn't going to. . . .

Shelby was in bed at Doc Seabrey's, supposedly hovering between life and death but in reality suffering only from a minor headache, which he admitted wasn't half as bad as some of the hangovers he had experienced. There was no skull fracture, of course. Seabrey had employed that ruse to get Shelby out of jail. . . . Emily Hale was in residence at the hospital, serving ostensibly as Seabrey's nurse.

Sheriff Sullers had disappeared, and his deputies were not in evidence. The law seemed to have vanished from Brandvil, without creating any change in the everyday life of the community. Mill Iron had come to town in force during the day, but thus far had precipitated no disturbance or strife.

"Tell us who killed Rawhide and we'll turn you loose," Renner said again, leaning toward the pitiful figure on the bed.

"I don't know," whimpered Herne. "Honest to God, I don't. I didn't do it. None of my boys did it."

"Why did you try to kill me then, that night at the Castle?"

"I didn't. You got smart. I just told the boys to rough you up."

"What made you carry Emily off, Herne?" asked Renner.

"Mule Garay wanted her, like I told you."

Benny Blue said, "I'll heat up a knife blade. That'll loosen his damn tongue."

"How can I tell you what I don't know?" wailed Herne.

"Why don't you go after Rawhide's widow and Dake Tirone?"

"They claim you had Rawhide murdered," Renner said.

"They're covering themselves up."

"You figure they did it, then?"

Herne moaned, his head rolling from side to side. "I don't *know*, goddamn it! They're as good a bet as anyone. *They* profited from Rawhide's death. *I* didn't gain anything from it."

"Who met you up in the cliffs the other day?"

"Three of my men. I've told you a dozen times." Herne named them wearily again.

Renner was beginning to believe the man was telling the truth. After an interval of sober introspection, he smiled slowly at Benny. "Drift downstairs, Ben, and drop the word around that I've got Jack Herne and he's going to squeal. Then we'll turn him loose and see who picks him up."

"That's murder!" bleated Herne. "You might as well shoot me right here."

"Why, if you're innocent?" demanded Renner. "If you don't know anything about it, nobody'll hurt you."

Benny Blue snorted. "And if they do, who cares? We've killed enough of your rotten crew, Herne. Let somebody else kill you."

There was a rap on the door. Benny opened it narrowly, gun in hand, and then snorted once more as he let Shelby in, clean, fresh and smiling. "The invalid!" Benny jeered. "A little knock on the noggin puts him to bed for twenty-four hours."

"With a nurse like Em, who wouldn't stay in bed?" Shelby

laughed. "The town's crawlin' with Mill Iron, I hear, but the sheriff and his boys are missin'." He looked at Herne and laughed the harder. "Is that sorry-lookin' specimen the great Jack Herne?"

"I'll go down and tell the bartenders to spread the news," Benny Blue said, and went out of the room.

Shelby poured himself a drink, and Renner told him what the plan was.

"He won't talk, huh?" drawled Shelby. "You'll wish you had, Black Jack."

"Nothing to tell you," groaned Herne. "Go to the widow and Tirone." Sweat poured down his flabby stubbled cheeks and dripped from his knobby nose. The small lipless mouth writhed in spasms of terror.

"We were going to work on him, Shelby," said Renner. "But we didn't have the heart to."

"I don't wonder, Mart," said Shelby. "I could cry just lookin' at the poor broken-down slob. Somebody'll take good care of him, when he gets out in the street."

Benny Blue returned soon, and said, "It's started. We'll wait here and let it simmer awhile. Tirone's out to the widow's, they say. No law in sight, but all kinds of Mill Iron."

They sat around smoking and drinking slowly, and Shelby gave Herne a drink but he gagged, choked, and couldn't get it down.

After a thoughtful silence, Benny Blue raised his white head and seamed leathery face. "Mart, what did you say they told you about Rawhide's will?"

"I was disinherited, Ben."

Benny snorted softly. "Now that's peculiar, come to think of it. I heard old Rawhide say more'n once or twice that no matter if his boy turned out to be the worst unhung bandit in the whole West, he'd never cut him off."

"He could've changed his mind, Benny, when I didn't write or anything," Renner said. "Maybe the blonde helped him change it. Anyway, Guy Ormond wouldn't lie about it."

"No-o, I reckon not. Guy's as honest a bankin' man as you'll ever see. I never took to bankers, as a rule, but I always liked Guy fine. . . ."

Shelby said, "Somebody'll light on Herne when we cut him adrift. Who do you boys figure it'll be?"

"Somebody from Mill Iron is my hunch," Renner said, and Benny nodded in deliberate agreement.

"I sure hope it's our old playmates, Prager and Mulcahy," said Shelby, with his reckless boy's grin.

Jack Herne moaned on the bed. "They'll kill me! I'm as good as dead this minute."

"They won't kill an innocent man, Jack," protested Renner.

"Shame if they did," Benny said. "A man of your character and quality. It'd put the whole Dondrino into mournin', Black Jack."

"If it's Mill Iron, that takes us straight to Dake Tirone and Cynthia," said Martin Renner, with quiet satisfaction. "And my old mustanging *compadre* Tansill will be somewhere along the way."

"When you take over the ranch, Mart, you'll need a good bartender," Benny Blue said, with his wry grin.

Renner smiled at both of them. "I sure will, with young Shelby riding for me, Benny."

Shelby had brought their horses over, and left them saddled and ready behind the saloon. He started out to take a look at them now, and Renner said: "Take them across to the stableyard in back of the Brock House, Shelby. We'll set Herne up on the other side of the street, and we'll be going out that way—if we go anywhere. Look things over but don't get into any jam." Shelby departed whistling, and Renner turned to Blue. "You still got that Henry here, Ben?"

Benny dug his sixteen-shot Henry rifle out of the closet, and inspected it with care. "All oiled and clean, Mart, and here's some shells." He handed it over with a box of .44-40 rimfire cartridges, and Renner tried the action and loaded the weapon. "I can cover the street and square from the awning out front," Renner said.

"You can pump a lot of lead fast with that Henry," said Benny. "It ain't so accurate any more at a distance, but for short quick work you can't beat it."

Shelby came back and reported, "The street's clearin', riders and rigs pullin' out now, but Mill Iron's still hangin' in town. Mostly downstairs here, with a few strays prowlin'

around outside. Expectin' somethin', they don't know what. . . . Set 'em up, barkeep."

"Set 'em up yourself, Hildy," said Benny.

"What did you call him?" Renner asked. "I've been wondering if he didn't have a first name."

Shelby grinned and flushed under the tan, and Benny snickered and said, "Meant to tell you, Mart, but it slipped my mind. He's got a front name all right, but he's kinda modest about usin' it."

"Name enough for all three of us," Shelby drawled.

"Hilde-brand." He made two words of it. "Hildebrand Shelby."

"Now that's what I call a real fancy highfalutin' name," Benny Blue declared, with sober pride.

"Sure sounds distinguished," Renner said gravely.

Shelby laughed merrily. "That name made me the fightin' man I am today. Had to lick every kid in every school and town I ever went to, on account of that name."

"Listen to him!" scoffed Benny. "If I've saved his neck once I've saved it a hundred times, right in the saloon downstairs. You only been here a week, Mart, and you had to rescue him once."

"Don't count when I'm drunk," Shelby protested airily.

"You ain't ever been sober until this week," Benny accused.

"My good influence, Ben," said Renner dryly. "Well, it's about time to make our move, boys, and this is the way I've got it figured . . ."

When he had finished, Shelby said, "If Mulcahy and Prager show, lemme have 'em, Mart. I been waitin' a long time for a crack at them two."

"You can have one of 'em, kid," said Benny Blue, sinking his teeth into a plug of tobacco. "I ain't goin' along just for the walk, son."

Martin Renner stroked the worn stock of the Henry. "I'll keep the odds even and the bunch off your backs—if it works out right."

XVI

IN the Renner homestead at the northeastern edge of Brandvil the lamplit air was charged with tension and ill-feeling, as Cynthia supervised the packing operations of two nervous and distraught maids, while Dake Tirone paced about the luxurious chambers with restless impatience.

"You don't have to take everything you own," Tirone said.

"I'll take what I please!" Cynthia flared back at him. "I'm not going to run away and leave all my things for that little dance-hall slut of Martin Renner's!"

"Be sensible, for once," Tirone advised coldly. "We aren't running away. I prefer to have you at the ranch, that's all."

"It's still running. And once you start running you never stop. . . . I never supposed one man could do this to you, Dake. I thought you weren't afraid of anybody in the world."

"I'm not, you fool! But sometimes it's necessary to use reason and judgment."

Cynthia regarded him with scorn, her golden head high and her blue eyes flashing. "You've certainly made a mess of everything. You were riding high until that Renner boy came back. It didn't take him long to cut the great Tirone down to size."

Tirone laughed. "You didn't accomplish much with him yourself, my fine lady."

"What did you expect me to do? Drag him off to bed?"

"I imagine you tried to," Tirone said caustically.

"It might have been interesting, at that. He's all man anyway."

Tirone made a weary gesture. "Let's not quarrel, Cynthia. Things will come our way, once I take a personal part in this business. My mistake was in delegating authority—but a man can't be everywhere at once. Everyone I relied on bungled the affair. Renner should have been dead a dozen times before now. But I might have known I'd have to do it myself."

"Why do I have to move out, if you're going to handle everything?"

"Because they've got Herne and he'll talk, and they'll be coming after you."

Cynthia laughed mockingly. "You've got an army of men in town, and still we have to run away. Can't they stop three men? One of them old and lame, another a punk kid."

"Don't underestimate anyone who can take Garay and Webley and Elgart—not to say Wolf Leiken," warned Tirone. "I've got a crew, but how many of them are any good with a gun? Prager and Mulcahy—and Tansill. Just those three."

"That should be enough," Cynthia said, quieter now. "But the way things are going, I guess it isn't . . . Sorry I was disagreeable, Dake. Go downstairs and have a drink, and I'll be down in a few minutes." She smiled and kissed him, and Tirone left the room.

He looked at the liquor cabinet but did not approach it. Tirone didn't want a drink, and the cigar he was smoking had turned rank. He threw it into the dead ashes of the fireplace, and walked out the front door. The spring night was mellow and fragrant, the sky aglitter with stars.

The custom-built Concord coach that had been Rawhide Renner's stood by the stable with four horses harnessed in. Fewster, the driver, leaned on the front wheel talking to another man, whom Tirone recognized as Ushkow, the large lumbering deputy. Tirone strode toward them and Fewster straightened off the wheel, and Ushkow turned and touched his hatbrim in an awkward salute.

"Well, what did you learn, man?" Tirone asked crisply.

"Nothin' good," Ushkow mumbled. "Sullers is still holed up in the Castle, dead drunk in bed in an upstairs room with that half-breed whore. Can't find any of the other deputies nowhere."

Dake Tirone snarled, his polished veneer cracking to reveal the cold wicked savagery underneath that handsome mask. "The stupid gutless bastard," Tirone said, biting off the words. "And all his gutless yellow-dog deputies . . . Where've they got Herne?"

"Nobody knows."

"Maybe they expect to find him sitting on the bar in the Alhambra," said Tirone. "Or under the skirts of some dance-hall doxie!"

"Sorry, Mr. Tirone," muttered Ushkow, wagging his shaggy head.

"You can't help it," Tirone said, regaining control of himself and speaking evenly. "You'd better ride the box out to Mill Iron with us, Ushkow. Get yourself a carbine if you haven't got one. Somebody might hit us on the way out."

"Saddle gun's in there on my horse," Ushkow said.

"Good. You keep some guns handy too, Fewster. We'll be rolling before long, if that woman ever finishes packing." Tirone turned and walked back to the fieldstone house, tall and immaculate and easy-striding on the moonlit lawn.

The other two watched him, and Fewster said, "Never saw the boss so riled up. Never heard him talk like that before. Reckon he's a ring-tailed heller if he ever busts loose. Some of them nice, quiet, polite ones are pure dynamite when they git a-goin'."

"Sullers always said he was a tough one," Ushkow agreed.

"Abe'll never git elected again," predicted Fewster.

"Don't think he even wants to," Ushkow said.

A few minutes later Coke Tansill rode out from town into the yard and swung jauntily down by the stable door, dropping his reins and flipping a casual hand at the pair beside the coach. Tirone appeared in the entrance of the house, beckoning urgently, and Tansill slouched toward him with lazy grace.

"Another bad one," Fewster said, nodding after Tansill. "Some say he come all the way up from Old Mexico to git Mart Renner."

"He better be good then," Ushkow said. "A man that can down Wolf Leiken and Mule Garay ain't got too much to worry about. . . . Yeah, they say Renner got Garay too."

"I know old Benny Blue's good," said Fewster. "Seen him go myself. And I hear that young Shelby's pretty slick with a Colt. With Mart Renner, that makes 'em three real tough hombres, mister."

Ushkow grunted. "Shelby's almost dead. I buffaloeed him the other night in the saloon."

"Yeah, but he ain't dyin', from what I hear. He's up and around this evenin'. You'll be runnin' into him again, Ushkow."

The big deputy gaped at him. "All right with me," he mumbled. "Next time it'll be shootin', and for keeps. . . ."

Tirone and Tansill entered the living room together, and Tansill helped himself to a drink from the cut-glass decanter, while Tirone looked on with cool disapproval.

"Anything new?" Tirone asked, irritated by this man's insolent assurance.

"Not much," Tansill drawled, thumbing his hat back on his blond head. "Heard they're turnin' Herne loose, but don't know when—or where."

"It's goddamn funny you couldn't locate him anywhere."

"Not so funny, Dake. We couldn't go through every house in Brandvil." Coke Tansill glanced about at the rich surroundings. "So this is where Renner sprung from? Not bad, not bad at all. With layouts like this and Mill Iron, what in the hell was he doin' chasin' wild horses down across the border?"

"The boys ready to pick up Herne?" demanded Tirone, his irritation growing.

"Sure. But when they do they'll have Renner and his friends in their hair."

"Your job is to keep them out of it, Coke."

Tansill shrugged and smiled. "I'm only one man, but I'll do my best. You're pulling out tonight, Dake?"

"That's right. Out to the ranch. Any objections?"

"Why, no, it's probably a good idea," Tansill drawled. "You're kinda edgy, ain't you, Dake? . . . If Renner gets away from us, here, you'll get him out there most likely."

"How can he get away, with the town full of Mill Iron hands?"

Tansill poured himself another drink. "Better than the stuff downtown . . . It's nighttime, Dake. Things happen when the guns start goin' off. Men don't always act like they plan to or ought to. Things look different through the smoke. You know how it is, Dake?"

"I know," Tirone said tautly. "Never think for a minute that I don't. I've seen as much of it as you have, Tansill."

"Maybe more. Maybe a whole lot more. *Quién sabe?* . . . Somewhere there's a bullet for all of us, who live with guns in hand."

"You're a philosopher." Tirone was half sneering.

"Let's say I believe in fate," Coke Tansill said slowly. "You don't ride the trails I have without comin' to believe in that."

Dake Tirone motioned abruptly. "All right, Tansill. Get back to the square and earn your money."

Coke Tansill smiled wryly. "Blood money. But there's blood on all of it, isn't there, Dake? The most I ever got for killin' a man. And the man I want to kill most of all . . . Sounds like a perfect deal, don't it?" He put down the glass, raked the hat to its customary slant on his tawny head, and sauntered languidly doorward. Lean and loose as a whip thong, Tansill was wearing two guns tonight and that go-to-hell grin on his thin, pointed, brown face.

Tirone walked with him to the door. "Have you seen Renner at all?"

"No, he hasn't been round. Blue and Shelby have been seen, but not Mart."

"Well, get him, this trip."

"I could've taken him the other night at the ranch."

"Neither the time nor the place for it," Tirone said. "But there's no use in waiting any longer now."

"All right," Tansill said, and stepped outside.

Dake Tirone wheeled and called up the staircase: "Cynthia! For the love of God, are you ever going to be ready?"

Coke Tansill heard this and smiled, as he crossed the lawn toward the stable. The big boss was really on the prod tonight, strung on the hair-trigger edge of breaking wide open. Well, that's what happened when a man got too big and wealthy and had too much on his mind. With Tansill things were simple and easy, direct and clear-cut.

He was to collect a thousand dollars for killing Mart Renner, a man he intended to kill anyway. When it was all over, all Tansill had to do was pick up the money and ride out of the Dondrino . . . Tirone could have his great ranch, his money and his blonde woman, his headaches and problems, worries and tensions and fears. Coke Tansill was not in the least envious, of Dake Tirone or any other living man.

"You boys are ridin' out on a lot of fun," he drawled, in passing Fewster and Ushkow at the private coach, and Few-

ster said, "You can have it, Coke. I'm gittin' a mite old for that kinda fun."

Coke Tansill mounted and loped out the driveway, turning along the street toward town. A thousand dollars was a lot of money to him, all he needed—for a while. It would go, as all the rest had gone, across bars and over gaming tables and into the hands of fancy women. But that was all right, too. Come easy, go easy, live today and the hell with tomorrow. Great men like Rawhide Renner were just as dead, when they died, as hired gunhands like Wolf Leiken.

Tansill glanced at the gateway in the stone wall as he cantered past, raising his hand in memory of Wolf Leiken who had died there. "You were good, Wolf," he murmured. "But I'm better. . . . Got to be a lot better, to put Mart Renner under."

Then the blasting of guns broke out in the direction of the central plaza, and Coke Tansill cursed softly and threw his horse forward at a gallop.

XVII

MARTIN RENNER, the Henry repeater in hand, lay stretched out on the flat board awning above the sidewalk and entrance to the Alhambra Saloon. Toward midnight the town was quieting down, with most of the horses, wagons and pedestrians gone from Front Street and the square. The barroom downstairs was still busy, but the majority of other places had closed for the night. Street lamps and tar-barrel flares illuminated the center of Brandvil, but outlying sections lay in darkness, except for a scattering of lighted windows.

Across the way the lone figure of Black Jack Herne stumbled to and fro on the plank walk before the Brock House, moving like a man in a trance, head bent and shoulders sagging. Young Shelby lurked on the shadowy porch of the slumbering hotel, with Herne directly in under his watchful eyes, and Benny Blue loitered behind the large stone watering trough at the middle of the square. Thus they had Herne between them, and even if he'd had the

energy he couldn't run away. But Black Jack was beyond hoping or caring what happened to him next.

A group of riders, drifting in half-drunk from the direction of the Crystal Castle, passed by without taking any notice of Herne or Benny, and went on out of town toward a home spread somewhere in the east. A dozen Mill Iron horses were still racked below Renner's position, their riders inside the bar. A man on foot wandered down this side of the street, peering across at Herne and then turning into the Alhambra. That ought to do it, Renner thought, if the fellow had identified Black Jack.

Soon the batwing doors squealed beneath the awning, and boots trampled out onto the slat sidewalk. Two men, it sounded like. After a brief pause they emerged into view and crossed toward Herne, and Renner smiled with satisfaction. Pat Mulcahy was leading the way, with Cactus Prager lagging behind to cover his back. They looked warily about as they walked, but Benny was hidden by the trough and Shelby was out of sight on the dark gallery of the hotel. Once certain they were alone with Herne, Mulcahy and Prager resumed their habitual cocky swagger.

Jack Herne faltered to an uncertain halt, and seemed to shrivel in his tracks. Prone on the rooftop, Renner lined his sights on the Mill Iron pair and waited, the stock cool and smooth against his cheek. It was Dake Tirone all right. Dake and Cynthia. Everything pointed to them. But how could they have deceived Rawhide and Guy Ormond so completely, made such close and trusting friends of two men like that?

Pat Mulcahy, squat and wide in the vague flickering light, reached Herne and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. Black Jack screamed thinly and yanked away, making a clumsy break for the hotel drive, but Mulcahy laughed and clubbed him down with a huge fist, dropping Herne into a rolling sprawl on the boardwalk.

Shelby's clear young voice came down from the Brock veranda then: "Lay off that poor little man, Pat, and look up here."

Mulcahy jerked upright and around, and swept into the two-handed draw for which he was noted, but Shelby's

right hand was faster and flawless in its motion. Burnt-orange fire lanced across the porch rail on a downslope, two swift spurts of it shocking Mulcahy backward.

Reeling and buckling on disjointed legs, Mulcahy shot into the ground with one hand, high and wild with the other. Windowglass shattered into a tinkling brittle rain somewhere behind Shelby, and his own Colt came down and flamed once more. Mulcahy made a lurching turn and floundered over an empty hitch-rail, hanging there on his belly for a moment and then heaving backward and crashing down flat on his shoulders across the slat sidewalk.

Cactus Prager was drawing and lunging forward in mid-street when Benny Blue's rasping voice reached him: "Look a-here, Cactus. This is our number."

Prager shifted his feet and switched his aim, but Benny had stepped clear of the trough and his gun was already leveling off and leaping aflame. Cactus Prager bent in the middle, sagged to his knees, and pitched forward on his thin chest, his late shot ripping up streamers of dust and screeching off the stone base of the trough.

On the far sidewalk Herne was sitting up, sobbing and holding his head in both hands, and Mulcahy, still alive somehow, was stirring feebly against the gritty planks, while Shelby watched from the hotel gallery. In the middle of the square Prager was writhing in the dirt, and Benny Blue had withdrawn slightly to face the Alhambra from the shelter of the horse trough.

Martin Renner came up in a crouch on the wooden awning, as men boiled out of the saloon into the street. He lashed a shot over their heads, kicking up gravel in front of them, and jacked another shell into the chamber. The rush stopped dead, the surprised Mill Iron hands turning to stare up at him. Coke Tansill was not among them.

"The show's over, boys!" Renner said, the Henry poised and ready. "Fifteen more shots in this and it's pointing right down your throats. Get back inside—and stay there!"

The small crowd hesitated and muttered angrily, milling about until Benny and Shelby slashed shots at their heels from behind. Then the men trooped back into the Alhambra, and Renner knew Benny and the kid would hold them there

while he got down. Swinging over the corner of the awning, Renner slid down the post to the ground. A gun blared at him from the doorway, and Renner slammed two shots in through the splintering batwings. Benny and Shelby laid their fire on the entrance and smashed the front windows of the Alhambra, driving back and pinning down the men inside.

Backing to the hitch-rack, Renner untied the reins one after another and chased the Mill Iron bronses away westward along Front Street. Bent over he ran for the water trough, with Shelby and Benny hammering shots over his head into the saloon. Together Renner and Benny hauled the hard-hit Prager to the other side of the square and down the alley toward the livery stable, with Shelby's fire covering both of them now. But Mill Iron was no longer trying to fight back from the Alhambra. With Mulcahy and Prager down, and Coke Tansill not present, they had no leadership, and little or no incentive and stake in this war anyway.

"You want Herne any more, Mart?" yelled Shelby, punching out empties and reloading his cylinders at the forward corner of the Brock House.

"No, leave him there," Renner called back. "They can take him to Doc's, along with Mulcahy and Prager."

Shelby came back and took the Henry to stand watch, while his comrades propped Prager up against the rear wall of the hotel and began asking him questions.

"I'm gutshot—goddamn you!" snarled Prager, sweat beading his vicious tortured features. "Don't bother me—with no foolish questions."

"What did you want of Jack Herne?" demanded Renner.

"We just—take orders," panted Prager. "We don't—know nothin'."

"Where's your boss?"

Prager grinned with protruding teeth, sly and mocking even in his agony. "Courtin' your stepmother—most likely."

"He killed Rawhide, didn't he?"

"Naw. He won Mill Iron—in a raffle." Cactus Prager's laugh turned into a retching groan. He doubled convulsively, clawed at his bloody stomach, and slid twisting sideward to the earth.

Renner straightened away from him. "No use, boys. He's

out, but I think he'll live. . . . We've got all we need anyway. It's Dake Tirone and he's out at the widow's. Come on, Shelby. That Mill Iron crew's had all they want of us tonight. Maybe Tirone and Tansill will stand up and fight."

They left Prager crumpled there at the rear corner, for the Mill Iron men to pick up when they came out after Mulcahy and Herne, and turned to where Shelby had tied their horses to the corral bars. The Brock House had awakened, with lamps lighting windows here and there, and Renner thought of the room he owed a week's rent on. He and Shelby had occupied it that first night in town, which seemed months ago now, and he and Benny had slept there last night.

In the saddle, the horses rested and lively beneath them, they threaded their way through shadow-stippled back yards and odorous alleys toward the northeast corner of the community. The midnight air was cool and damp, refreshing on their sweaty fevered faces, but the foul taste of powder lingered in their mouths. Stillness was deep after the racketing gunfire, but the concussions seemed to echo yet in their heads. Tin cans clanked under hoofs as they plodded among ash piles and rubbish dumps and rain barrels, and the sweetness of flowers mingled sickeningly with the stench of garbage.

"I put three slugs into that Mulcahy and he's still alive," Shelby said wonderingly.

"Hit 'em in the gut, kid, and one's enough," Benny told him.

"Well, my man wasn't around to laugh at us like yours was," Shelby jibed back at him.

"Wonder why Tansill wasn't there?" Renner mused.

Shelby laughed. "Maybe he's holdin' the candle for Tirone and the widow."

"All right, Hildebrand," grinned Renner. "Get your mind up out of the gutter."

"I sure was wrong about Tirone and Cynthia," admitted Benny Blue. "But so was Guy Ormond and plenty other people."

On the outskirts the air was cleaner and more fragrant. Renner breathed deeply of it, but the powder reek persisted

in his senses. The walled estate loomed ahead of them, the stone house dark and silent, and Renner knew they were too late. Light glimmered from a lantern hanging within the broad arch of the stable, but no one moved about the premises. The scent of roses came on the breeze, and Renner looked at the gateway in which Wolf Leiken had fallen.

Old Sam Derry had died in his burning house, and the Wolf had gone down here. Up on the tablelands, Garay and Elgart and Webley had fallen under their guns on Herne's spread. And back there in the square tonight, Pat Mulcahy and Cactus Prager lay severely wounded. . . . But the big ones, the ones Renner wanted, were still alive and at large, unhurt and free. Dake Tirone, for his father, and Coke Tansill, for his friend Glenway.

They rode up the drive and dismounted before the stable, and Renner smiled as a long shadow fell across the lantern-lit floor and an old Negro stood there blinking out at them. Jubal was tall, stooped and ancient, with a deep-lined tragic face. He faced them in drowsy defiance, until his vision cleared enough to recognize Renner. Then his smile was wonderful to see.

"Mistah Mart hisself! Ah heared you was back, wondered if you was evah comin' to see old Jube. Ah knowed you'd come back some day. Things ain't so good heah since Mistah Rawhide gone. This bright-haired woman and her man takin' over, high and mighty like . . . Ah'm sho' happy to welcome you home, Mistah Mart."

Renner shook hands with the old man. "Meant to get around sooner, Jubal. Where are the folks tonight?"

"Lit out fo' the ranch, Ah reckon, just a little while back. They don't say where they go, but it's likely Mill Iron. They don't talk to an old colored man like you and Doak and Mistah Rawhide done."

"Who went, Jubal?"

"The woman and man in the coach. Fewster drivin' it, and a big lawman with a funny name ridin' on top with him."

"Ushkow?" asked Shelby.

"That's him."

"How many horses, Jube?" inquired Renner.

"Foah, Mistah Mart," said Jubal. "Good fast ones."

"How long they been gone?"

"Maybe fifteen, twenty minutes. Maybe half an hour. Took some baggage, Mistah Mart."

Renner smiled warmly at him. "Thanks, Jubal. We're going after them. I'll come and see you again, as soon as I get the time."

"You do that, Mistah Mart," said Jubal, beaming. "Sho' glad to see mah last boy again."

Renner started to turn away, and then whirled back with a sudden thought. "Jubal, what did you do with that thousand dollars Rawhide left you?"

Jubal shook his head sadly. "Ah nevah got it, Mistah Mart."

"You never did?" Renner's astonishment was genuine. "I don't understand that, Jube. Dad always said you were getting a thousand."

"Don't mattah much, at mah age," Jubal said. "But Ah sho' hopes you get what's comin' to you, Mistah Mart."

Renner smiled and patted the old man's bent shoulder. "Maybe we'll both get ours, Jubal."

They mounted and rode out, and Benny Blue pulled his grullo over beside Renner's bay. "You thinkin' what I'm thinkin', Marty?"

"I'm thinking anyway, Benny," replied Renner, with a bleak crooked grin. "Thinking considerable . . . He might've cut me off, Benny, but he never would have old Jubal."

XVIII

AFTER some debate they decided to try the short cut through Sangaree Swamp, the most direct route to Mill Iron, which lay well to the north and east of Brandvil. The main road ran straight eastward to the Taloncillos, the wagon road to the ranch branching northeast at the stage depot. Four good horses drawing that light coach would make fast time, especially after Tirone heard that shooting in the square.

It was imperative to intercept Dake Tirone this side of his

destination. Even with a Mill Iron force in town, there was a formidable crew left at the spread. Too many guns there for three men to charge into. Renner thought their best bet was the swamp. Benny Blue was dubious, but willing to string along. Young Shelby didn't care which way they went, as long as the end of the trail promised excitement and conflict. Ushkow was on that coach, and Shelby wanted to settle with the hulking deputy.

They struck out of town toward the Sangaree, and Renner remembered that Coke Tansill's whereabouts was still unaccounted for. He wouldn't have stayed home on a night like this, for he was the best gunfighter Mill Iron had—unless Tirone was his equal or superior, which Renner doubted. It still seemed unlikely that Tansill had been telling the truth about wanting a truce with Renner, but Coke was unpredictable. Something might have changed his mind, caused him to pull out of this war-torn country. Maybe Tirone wouldn't pay the price Tansill wanted for his services.

They all had traversed the marshlands cutoff, at one time or another, but it was treacherous going, particularly by night, although the moon was bright and high for them. The air smelled dank and sour as the three riders descended nearer to the drowned timbered bottomland, hazed with shifting mists. Shadows took on a different aspect, and there was a soggy rankness on everything in the vicinity. The Sangaree looked impenetrable, and Renner began to wonder if they'd made a mistake in coming this way.

"It ain't smart, hittin' this swamp," Benny Blue grumbled, as they slowed on the gloomy perimeter.

"Maybe not, Ben," said Renner. "But it's our only chance of gaining that half hour on them."

Checking landmarks and comparing memories, they picked out a narrow precarious trail that twisted from one brush-tangled island to the next. The water on either side had a dark oily sheen under the fog, with salt cedars and scrub pines rising gray-shrouded from its foul surface. Dead logs were scattered like huge jackstraws, and rotten stumps bulked weirdly among them. It was a nightmare world, eerie and evil in the misty moonlight.

At intervals the hardpan track was submerged, and the

horses balked and pulled back, prancing and whickering nervously. Renner dismounted finally, the others following suit, and waded warily ahead, feeling his way in the stagnant water and leading the skittish bay. If a boot or a hoof slipped off the solid bottom, thick mud clung and dragged on it with a terrifying suction. There were quicksands in here that would soon swallow a horse and man, if they ever bogged down into it.

The slow procession filed on, slogging and splashing from hummock to hummock, fighting through brush and skirting logs canted at insane angles. Two miles of this marsh seemed like twenty. Here and there Renner made false starts, the firm trail petering out into muck and water, and was forced to backtrack and try another direction. He began to doubt his instincts, but Benny said he was heading all right.

Around them were the faint sounds of swamp creatures stirring in the vaporous darkness, slithering through reeds, swimming in black lagoons, flying through the murky air. The call of a loon echoed crazily over watery wastes, as unreal as this whole sunken area.

It was painful and nerve-racking work in the clammy fog, and Renner's eyes ached from the strain. In spots the trees and mist were too dense for the moonlight to penetrate, and he inched forward at the point of the tiny column, keening his senses, trusting to instinct and sheer luck. Always finding footing somehow and making progress to the east. The swamp was cold, but men and mounts were sweating freely under the tension. Renner's chest and shoulders felt as wet as his soaked feet, squishing in the muddy boots. It was difficult to breathe in that vile smothering atmosphere.

At the heart of this morass, a storm had leveled an entire stand of rotten waterlogged timber. The trunks were strewn at fantastic angles, the root systems exposed like jagged giant claws. There was more stable footing underneath, but progress was even slower and rougher among the logs and snags. Grimly Renner led them onward.

After an eternity of winding and clambering, stumbling and bumping into veiled barriers, they left the windfall behind to plod and slosh through live and standing pines and cedars of stunted size. To break and barrel through thickets

that shredded clothing, raked flesh, and set the horses to snorting and pitching.

But at last the terrain was rising and drying underfoot, the rancid pools and oozing muck of the Sangaree quagmire in back of them, the stink of it lessening in their nostrils. It was a tremendous relief to climb clear of the swamp, to mount and ride on natural dry and solid earth once more, and to inhale the clean air of open country with its grass and sage and new-leafed trees.

The horses needed no urging in this wonderful freedom, and they pressed on at a swift clip through open parklike timber and over rolling sagebrush plains. The Little Don stretched before them, a distant ribbon of silver under the moon, and it was somewhere in this section that Rawhide Renner's body had been discovered—two years before. Where was I and what was I doing at that time? Renner wondered. Punching cattle on the Brazos, breaking broncs on the Pecos, or lying drunk with some dark-eyed wench in Laredo?

They stopped to listen and scan the night landscape, hearing and seeing nothing of the coach, and Renner feared they were too late. Setting the pace on his bay, he led them galloping toward the shallows of the Little Don crossing.

"Should of took the road," Benny Blue said morosely, as they drew up to look and listen again. "They've crossed and gone on into Mill Iron by now."

"We'll go in after 'em then," Shelby said. "Most of the crew's back in Brandvil."

"Still enough of 'em out here to hold the fort, kid," said Benny.

"That's right, Benny," said Renner glumly. "If they're home we can't hit 'em. We'll have to wait. . . . But listen! That sounds like a coach to me. Coming up this side of the Don."

It *was* the coach, rocking and swaying as it clattered into the long curve toward the river, the four horses running hard in under the deft whiplash of Fewster, Ushkow bulking massive on the seat beside the driver. And below would be Cynthia and Tirone, riding in cushioned comfort within the specially built Concord.

"I'll eat my words—and like 'em," Benny said. "Reckon even I can be wrong once in a while, boys."

They rode forward down the gradual slope, their mounts flattened out in full stride beneath them. There wasn't time to cut in front of the vehicle, but they might catch it from behind before it reached the ford. Racing recklessly through trees and brush, they struck the road at a smashing rate and drove on into the dust of the rig, that hung like silvery gauze in the moonbeams.

Exulting in the speed of the chase, the power of the great bay gelding between his thighs, Martin Renner drew his right-hand Colt but held his fire, smiling thinly into the rushing wind and dirt. As the coach approached the shallows in the stream, the pursuers were closing up at a headlong driving pace. Ushkow started shooting back at them, muzzle lights streaking along the deck, and Dake Tirone opened fire from the carriage window. Bullets whined and droned about the three riders, but they hurtled on with unslackened momentum in the smoking dust.

Renner and his companions held their fire until they were within fair handgun range, and by that time the lead horses were splashing into the ford. Renner held to the roadway, while Shelby swung off to the left and Benny Blue pulled away to the right, those two fanning out to target on the draft horses. Ushkow's rifle blasted steadily from the box, and Tirone's fire torched out of the cab. Renner felt the hot suction of passing lead, as he lined shots at the big deputy on top.

. In midstream the off-wheel horse trumpeted and went down kicking and thrashing in white sheeted spray, the coach bucking and jarring to a sudden stop. The other horses plunged and fought in the traces, cramping the front wheels as they flogged sidewise in snorting panic. Fewster dropped the reins and went for his six-guns, cutting loose with both hands, adding to the hammering racket and the streamers of flame jetting back and forth between the coach and the shoreline.

From the flanks Shelby and Benny Blue lashed the deck with wicked cross fire, and Ushkow jerked as a slug smashed him out of the front boot, hurling him into an awkward

spread-eagled dive over the wheel. He landed with a resounding splash, the water geysering high, and was lost in the current that foamed and frothed amid dark, wet boulders.

Benny Blue's grullo pitched and cartwheeled in billowing dust on the riverbank to the right, flinging Benny headfirst through the air. Renner had a glimpse of the little old-timer, head bare and white, bouncing and sprawling underneath the alders and cottonwoods down there.

Leaping from the saddle and stalking forward on foot, Renner joined Shelby in laying gunfire upon the driver. Fewster fell to his knees on the seat, reared up and toppled screaming backward over the dash and down under the churning hoofs of his team. Alive by some miracle, Fewster floated free and scrambled frantically for the far shore, wading and then crawling through the water. Renner had a bead on him, but did not trigger, letting Fewster creep weakly out into cover on the other side of the river.

Then Shelby was down, a shot from the coach lifting him from the leather and spilling him into a clump of buckbrush, the black horse running free and riderless under the salt cedars and willows. . . . Renner's hammer clicked on a spent shell, and he lunged behind a rock to reload, a bullet from Tirone slashing stone dust across his cheek. Two men on either side were down and out of the fight. It was between Renner and Tirone now. His .44 ready again, the other one untouched in the sheath on his left leg, Renner waited with fury and hatred burning savagely through him.

Benny had fallen like a dead man, and Shelby must be hit hard, perhaps dying. . . . "Come on out, Tirone!" yelled Renner, hoarse with pent-up feeling against the man. "Come out, you slick slippery sonofabitch!"

"I'm out of shells," Tirone called back. "I have no alternative. . . . Don't shoot! I'm coming out empty-handed."

He opened the door and stepped coolly and casually into knee-deep water, facing the bank with hands hanging empty at his sides. "What in God's name is the meaning of this, Renner?" demanded Dake Tirone. "Have you gone mad, man?"

Renner rose from the sheltering rock and walked forward, holstering his Colt in the hope that it might tempt

Tirone to draw on him. "You killed my father, Tirone," he said, voice soft and deadly. "Now I'm going to kill you."

"You're mistaken, boy. Your father was my friend. I never could have harmed him."

"Who did it, then?"

"If I knew, Martin, that man would answer to me."

"You're lying in your teeth, Tirone. Crawling to save your miserable life. Go for your gun like a man!"

Dake Tirone smiled, still suave and poised and utterly fearless. "My guns are empty. I have no more shells. I don't crawl, Martin, for you or anyone else in the world. But I'm glad I don't have to kill you."

"I'll furnish the gun." Renner tapped his left-hand weapon. "You aren't snaking out of this, mister. You're going to die here."

Tirone shook his head. "I won't accept your gun, Martin. I don't want to kill you, boy. And you can't shoot a defenseless man—can you?" He smiled dimly, standing straight, calm and relaxed beside the coach in mid-river, the moon-gilded water swirling about his knees.

Renner sighed in weary disgust. "All right, get your woman out of there, and come on in."

Lead sang and seared Renner's upper right arm as a small-calibered pistol cracked spitefully and flame tongued from the door of the Concord. Tirone's hand was blurring across his chest to the shoulder-holster, and freeing his short-barreled revolver with deft quickness.

Stunned by that sneak shot from Cynthia, Martin Renner recovered and reacted with smooth speed, lifting the big Colt from its leather sheath in a sharp arc, thumb and trigger finger working in perfect co-ordination, the gun kicking up hard with the explosion.

The muzzle blasts came together and met blindingly above the rippled sheen of the Little Don. The reports blended into one terrific roar, beating upon the eardrums. Renner felt the scorching breath of the bullet, and saw Tirone stiffen and turn with the impact of a .44 slug, twist, and lean his bowed head against a varnished panel of the coach. Cynthia shrieked from the interior, and Tirone stood propped there, stark and arched, head on the wood and arms dangling.

Renner brought his barrel back into line and thumbed the hammer once more, the Colt jumping in his large firm hand. Dake Tirone heaved erect and away from the Concord, legs pumping and arms flailing puppetlike. He fell backward, splashing and churning the water into lacy froth, and then drifting limply with the current.

"Throw that gun out, woman, or you get it too!" Renner ordered.

Cynthia cast her pistol into the stream, and collapsed sobbing inside the coach.

Renner plowed into the water to catch Tirone under the arms and haul him ashore. Drenched and broken and bleeding, he sprawled there in the gravel and cattails, a feeble spark of life still left in the man. Renner bent over him.

"Not me," Tirone moaned, staring straight up at Renner.

"You were in on it," Renner said.

"Yes, but—I didn't— Not me," he panted, with the final breath in him. "It was—" His lips framed a name that he could not utter. The name that Mart Renner had dreaded to hear.

Dake Tirone shuddered and died with that unspoken name on his bloody lips, leaving Renner chilled and empty, sick and desolate enough to lie down and die beside him.

He carried Cynthia in from the coach and left her on the bank. "Did Dake tell you?" she cried hollowly. "Do you know—now?"

Renner nodded dully. "I guess I knew—before. But I didn't want to believe it."

"Why did you have to kill him?"

Renner laughed harshly. "You both tried to kill me. You were both involved in Rawhide's death. Even if you didn't pull the trigger."

He looked across the river and saw Fewster hobbling and lurching along on the moon-whitened road to Mill Iron. Ushkow's body had washed downstream somewhere. It was just as well to be rid of them both.

In the brush Renner was thankful to find Shelby alive but unconscious, with a bullet hole in his shoulder. After washing and bandaging the wound, he left the boy at the roadside and walked down the shoreline in search of Benny Blue,

afraid that he was going to find him dead. . . . But the white-haired little man was just coming to, sitting up and snarling curses as he cradled his broken left arm. The grullo had been killed in under him, and the fall had knocked Benny out and fractured his arm.

"Is the kid all right, Mart?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"He will be, Ben. Got a slug through the shoulder."

"We make a clean sweep, son?"

"Fewster's heading for home, wounded. Ushkow and Tirone are dead."

"Tirone do any confessin', Mart?"

Renner nodded. "A little. He was in on it, Benny. But he didn't do the killing." He picked up the saddle gear from the dead horse.

Benny wagged his head mournfully. "Afraid of that, son. I could feel it comin'. Reckon you could, too."

"It don't make it any easier to take—or understand," Martin Renner said. "But I began to know when Jubal told me he never got that thousand. . . ."

"Money," Benny Blue said, and spat tobacco juice. "Too much of it corrupts a man. Even a good man, livin' and dealin' with all that money, is apt to go wrong. . . . And Guy Ormond was probably hit hard when things went to hell back in Seventy-three."

They walked upstream to where the wounded Shelby and the weeping Cynthia were waiting, with the body of Tirone on the gravel beach nearby. Benny Blue muttered, "I must be gettin' old and brittle, to bust a goddamn arm fallin' off a horse. I'm goin' to miss that blue bronc, Marty."

"If we don't get shot or hung in Brandvil," said Renner, "you might wind up with a whole string of horses, Benny."

Renner waded to midstream and cut the dead horse out of the harness. Straightening out the other three, he backed them and the coach ashore, and turned them around to head for town. Mounting his bay, Renner caught up Shelby's black and hitched him into the off-wheel position, after removing the saddle. Then, with one-armed assistance from Benny, he hoisted Tirone's body and the two saddles to the top and lashed them down on the deck.

His bay tethered to the rear of the coach, Renner lifted

Shelby gently inside and laid him on the front seat, leaving the back seat for Cynthia and Benny Blue. With them inside and the loose guns gathered, Renner climbed to the box and started the horses and rig rolling down the road, following the Little Don toward the Dondrino River.

On a southwesterly course to the main highway and Brandvil, and whatever fate awaited them there. Behind them were Ushkow's drowned corpse, two dead horses, and Fewster dragging himself homeward. Ahead of them might be almost anything, but Mart Renner was too tired to care much.

I have killed three men here—Wolf Leiken and Mule Garay and Dake Tirone, he brooded morbidly. And I must kill one more—or two. And I haven't the heart or the stomach or the will left for it.

XIX

IT was lonely on the topside in the waning night, with only the body of Dake Tirone strapped on the deck at his back for company, and strange thoughts flickered through Renner's mind in a disorderly and haunting sequence, involving the dead as well as the living.

He was swimming again with Doak in their dammed-up pool in the Little Don. . . . He saw Rawhide lifting him onto his first pony, a pinto. . . . Fishing with Guy Ormond and he could smell the frying trout mixed with woodsmoke and pines, and he thought Guy looked like God or General Robert E. Lee. . . . He was sick in bed, with Doc Seabrey sitting beside him telling marvelous stories. . . . He watched Sam Derry work on guns in the shop that smelled cleanly of oiled steel. . . . Benny Blue showed him how to work patiently in gentling a bronco. . . . He was lying with Emily Hale in a summer meadow, with a breeze rippling the tall grass, lulling them half-asleep, and it was like being pleasantly drowned in a clear sunny sea of green-gold. . . . Stalking mustangs with Glenway in the beautiful Palo Duro Canyon of the Red River, north of the Staked Plains.

Now they reached the darkened log stage depot and swung

westward on the main thoroughfare, and Renner remembered the afternoon of his arrival here, after the coyote dun Spanish had been shot in Red Gap. It seemed months or years ago instead of a week, or was it eight days now? . . . So much had happened in that short span of time.

Four of us five were passengers in the stagecoach that first day, Renner reflected wonderingly. All of us except Benny were there. . . . Dake Tirone was alive, charming and debonair, and now he's dead. Cynthia was the lovely gracious lady of means, and now she's broken, in more ways than one. Young Shelby was passed out drunk then, and now he is wounded and unconscious. . . . And I was a drifting rider without a horse, coming home to see a father who had been dead two years. And now I'm a killer, with still more killing to do.

Brandvil was pretty well cleaned up, but Rawhide's murderer was still there, and the worst of the job yet to be done. Martin Renner hated to think of lifting his gun against Guy Ormond, although he was positive of the banker's guilt.

He wished the law would take care of Guy, but it was too much to hope that Abel Sullers would ever take action against such a prominent citizen. Abe never arrested anybody but drunken cowhands and saddle tramps. That was why men like Martin Renner had to take the law into their own hands. And so become known as outlaws . . .

By the time they pulled into town, Sullers would probably have a posse out to jail or lynch them—if he hadn't fled the country. This prospect was annoying more than alarming to Renner. He wanted to wind up this chore without any more interference or side issues. He had done enough gunfighting to last a lifetime. Renner wanted to settle with Ormond and get it over with quick, and then try to forget the whole brutal business.

He saw everything with aching crystal clarity, at last. Somehow Guy Ormond had learned that he was coming back to the Dondrino, and had tried to ambush him in the pass of Red Gap.

Ormond had seen him going to old Sam Derry's that first evening, and had fired at Renner after he left the gunsmith's. Then Ormond had rescued him from Sheriff Sullers, a friendly

act with a secret motivation behind it. Ormond wanted him outside where he could be killed, not safely locked up in the jailhouse.

And Ormond, or some hired tool, must have murdered Sam Derry and burned down his place.

The offer of a share from Cynthia's estate had been an attempt to buy Renner off and get him out of Brandvil at once. For Guy Ormond had altered Rawhide Renner's will, to make Cynthia and Tirone and himself the beneficiaries. With Jack Herne and his gunmen, and perhaps Wolf Leiken, cut in for minor splits . . . It wouldn't have been difficult to accomplish, for Ormond handled all legal and financial matters for Rawhide.

And Martin Renner had been left out altogether.

I might have accepted that, Renner mused, if it hadn't been for old Jubal. . . . You made a mistake, Guy, when you chiseled a paltry thousand off the old Negro stableman. I knew right then, but I wouldn't admit it. Not even to myself. . . .

But it was still a hard thing to swallow and digest. His father murdered and robbed by a lifelong friend and partner. It was enough to sour Renner on all life and humanity and the world at large. He had always looked up to Guy Ormond as a pillar of goodness and honesty. "Square and solid as a brick," people called Ormond. Who could you trust, if a man like that turned false, treacherous, and rotten to the core?

Renner smiled gravely, as the answer instantly occurred to him. He could trust the two men in the coach below, old Benny Blue and young Hildebrand Shelby, all the way from hell to breakfast. Public opinion might term them a broken-down bronc peeler turned bartender and a worthless devil-may-care drunkard, but Renner knew far better. They'd do to ride the river with, to have on your side when the going was roughest. They don't make them any better than Benny Blue and young Shelby.

The moon had set and the early morning hours were black, the river a misty thread on the left, the road a dim gray ribbon ahead, the horses blurred bobbing shapes before Renner's dull heavy eyes. He was tired, drained of emotion, his anger and hatred spent. Too weary to hold any strong feel-

ing against Ormond, or to take much interest in the task confronting him this morning.

The Panic of 1873 must have hit Guy, wiped out all his investments, Renner thought. So he turned on my father, turned to murder. Guy did the long-range shooting, he always liked those old Sharps, and probably Tirone fired the cover-up shot with Rawhide's .44. . . . The bastards. The dirty sneaking yellow bastards.

Renner swayed on the wide seat, the ribbons in his numb hands, hearing as from a distance the hoofbeats and harness jingle, the creak of wood and leather, rattling wheels and grinding axles. His feet were damp and cold, his sweated clothes had dried stiffly in the night wind, and his bones ached from weariness and the jolting of the box. He felt old and uncomfortable, bitter and disgusted, worn to exhaustion.

Renner wanted a good long drink and a cigarette, the comfort of Emily Hale's arms and lips. A warm dry place to sleep in, sleep for a week. And awake to find Em there with him. Every morning for the rest of his life.

Now that the action was over—temporarily, at least—fear touched Renner and he shivered deep inside. He could be lying dead with the others, as dead as Tirone on the deck behind him and Ushkow in the Little Don. . . . A breath of time here, a fraction of an inch there, and he would have been so much cold meat, sightless, senseless, unfeeling, unknowing. As dead as if he had never lived at all . . . But to hell with that kind of thinking.

Renner wondered if old Rawhide had any way of knowing what his boy had done here in the Dondrino, and how the old man would feel about it if he could know. Would he look at his son with respect instead of contempt? Would he want to shake his hand and say, "You're all right, boy. You did a good job, and I'm proud of you."

When Mart Renner got this last one and ended it, would Rawhide rest any easier in his grave, or wherever he had gone? . . . Without his father's approval, it all seemed meaningless and futile. Even the fact that he might become the owner of Mill Iron now, and all the rest of the property and money—if he lived and stayed out of prison.

"Why, I'm liable to be a rich man," Renner said aloud. "If I don't get to be a dead one first."

And what would that mean to me, if it should happen? Well, I could marry Emily in proper style, and make her the mistress of Mill Iron. I could hire Benny Blue and young Shelby, and anybody else I liked and wanted on the spread. A nice home, a fine ranch to run, money for anything I needed. . . . But Renner wasn't sure he wanted all that money. Look what it had done to Guy Ormond. And all it got Rawhide was a bullet from ambush.

Renner laughed at himself, in the night breeze. "Don't spend it all before you get it, boy," he advised ironically. "Right now you don't even own a horse. And you're wanted for three killings, probably charged with several more."

The dark was fading, the sky slowly graying, and a few lights winked palely in the town ahead. White vapors shrouded the Dondrino, hazing its marginal cottonwoods and willows. Renner looked back and watched the eastern horizon take on streaks of color from the sun, as it rose behind the Taloncillos. The colors brightened from lemon to gold and pink to scarlet, as the invisible sun climbed nearer to the skyline of peaks. A wilderness of clouds was stained with blues and purples, amber and crimson hues. Dew glistened on grass and sage, and cattle lowed in the distance.

Another day was on the verge of dawning, as Renner took the Concord into Brandvil and glanced at the white-washed brick house of Guy Ormond on its rise at the southeastern edge of town. Are you sleeping sound and peaceful, Guy? he wondered. Or are you keeping a lone vigil, waiting for the death that you must know will be coming soon?

Front Street and the square were empty, as they clattered through, and Renner turned his team into the driveway beside Doc Seabrey's large frame house. Climbing stiffly down over the wheel, Renner reached inside the coach and hauled Shelby out with care, while Benny Blue roused Cynthia from her semistupor and brought her along after Renner and his burden, holding his broken left arm to his body. Shelby seemed to have grown a lot heavier since Renner had lifted him last, and Martin set his teeth against the strain as he labored toward the side entrance.

Doc Seabrey opened the door, his eyes sunken and blood-shot in a gaunt haggard face. With great gentle hands, he helped Renner carry Shelby to the operating table, which looked as if it had been occupied most of the night.

"You're bringing me a lot of business, Martin," said Seabrey. "And the undertaker more, I presume. I think I have saved the lives of Cactus Prager and Pat Mulcahy—somewhat against my better judgment. Emily rendered her excellent assistance, and she is sleeping now."

"This lady'll probably need something to make her sleep, Doc," said Renner, as they shook hands.

Cynthia meekly took the sleeping potion, and went on to the room designated by the doctor. She no longer seemed to care what she did or where she was.

Seabrey glanced at Blue. "Well, you're still walking anyway, Ben."

"Sure, I'm tougher than these young sprouts, Doc," said Benny, with his gargoyle grin. "Tend to the kid there. All I got's a busted wing."

"There's a federal marshal in town, Mart," said Seabrey, cutting away Shelby's blood-soaked shirt and the rude bandage.

Renner groaned. "That's all we need, Doc!"

"You may be glad to see him, Marty," said Seabrey, working over the wounded boy with swift precision. "Shelby's lucky, a nice clean hole here. . . . How many did you kill?"

"Tirone and Ushkow."

Seabrey smiled. "Casualties are lighter than I expected."

"There'll be more," Renner murmured dryly. "One more, at least."

"About this marshal, Doc?" prodded Benny.

"Name of Kolloway," said the doctor. "Seems like a good man. Here to investigate Black Jack Herne's outfit—and the Renner estate. Said it looked as if someone was doing all his work, cleaning house ahead of him."

Renner sighed with relief. "Maybe he's all right then. Maybe he'll keep Sullers off our necks."

"He found Sullers drunk in the Crystal Castle," said Seabrey, with a smile. "Bedded down with some *señorita*

there. Kolloway doesn't hold Sullers in high esteem, if that's any comfort to you, Mart."

"About time they sent a marshal in here," Benny grumbled. "If he'd waited another day he wouldn't have one damn thing to do in Brandvil. As it is, he ain't got much."

"Mart, you'd better look Kolloway up," Seabrey suggested. "He's in Sullers's office at the jail, I believe."

"All right, Doc," said Renner. "Take good care of the boys for me."

"I'm anxious to set that arm for Benny. He has insulted me rather often in the past. It will be a fine chance to even the score."

Benny Blue snorted. "Where the hell do you hide your liquor, Doc? A man in pain like I am is entitled to some consideration, even from a butcher like you."

Seabrey pointed to a cabinet. "Don't drink it all now, Benny. The kid here's going to need some of that whiskey."

XX

OUTSIDE in the drive, Renner untied the bay gelding from the back end of the Concord, and led him into Seabrey's stable. There he unsaddled and rubbed down the horse, watered and grained him and put him in a stall. "Rest well, red horse," he said. "You've earned it."

Back at the coach Renner cleared out the carbines and hand guns, and stacked them by the doorsteps. Climbing on top, not looking at Tirone's face-down form, he unlashed the saddles of Shelby and Benny, dropping them into the grass at the side of the house. He could leave Shelby's black with the other coach horses at old Jubal's stable. He didn't know what to do with Tirone's body, and decided to leave it there on the deck.

Unwrapping the reins and letting off the brake, Renner roused the team and backed the Concord out into Front Street. He drove back through the square without seeing anyone, and wheeled the rig north toward the old stone homestead. The sun was rimming the Taloncillo crests with fiery red now, coming up as red as blood, and the world

was brighter and warmer and better with sunup. Renner felt wide awake again, his muscles limbered from the activity at Doc's, his mind clear and sharp. Perhaps Marshal Kolloway would relieve him of the job of taking Guy Ormond.

The fieldstone house was still slumbering and silent, and nobody stirred about the walled-in grounds. Renner halted the team and coach before the stable, setting the brake and tying the ribbons around the whipsocket. Jubal would be up and out soon to care for the horses, and the sight of Tirone dead wouldn't make the old Negro too unhappy. Renner jumped down and started walking back toward the center. It was a relief to move on foot, stretching his long legs and swinging his arms. . . . You'll get your thousand after all, Jubal, he thought.

The rising sun paved east-west streets and alleys with red-gold, with blue and lavender shadows spreading beneath western walls. Roosters crowed and dogs barked, and smoke began to plume from the chimneys of Brandvil.

Things were shaping up better than Renner had anticipated here. Thanks to the presence of a U.S. marshal, Renner might be on the side of the law instead of a fugitive from justice. Local law, as embodied in Abe Sullers, had always supported the wrong more than the right, but all this was changed with the coming of a federal officer.

It was heartening to think of men like Doc Seabrey and Benny Blue and young Shelby. In spite of the Tirones and Hernes and Ormonds, there were some mighty fine men in this country. Enough of them to prevail, in the long run, over the back-stabbing, bushwhacking, throat-cutting elements of evil.

Renner felt a dull burn on his right arm, near the shoulder, and saw the scorched tear in his brush jacket where Cynthia's shot had grazed him. If that had hit, Tirone would have killed him sure. As it was, it had nearly given Tirone the advantage he needed. Luck, pure and simple. A gun-fighting man had to have luck, along with nerve and skill and speed, in order to exist for any length of time in this raw primitive land.

Renner would go to the jailhouse and meet Kolloway, and

they'd go after Guy Ormond and bring this war to an end. Mill Iron is mine, Renner thought, with mild wonder. Those people had no honest claim to it. I should have known Rawhide wouldn't turn against his own son, even a no-good black sheep runaway son like I was.

Renner turned the corner into the central plaza, and stopped short, frozen in his tracks. All the brightness went out of the morning, and the good buoyant feeling seeped out of him. Coke Tansill was lounging there against the upright of a wooden awning, an insolent grin on his lean sharp face, hair glinting golden under the rakish hat. Lazily he pushed off from the post and stood slouched and easy, smiling at Renner.

"You want it now, Coke?" asked Renner, with icy restrained anger. He had almost forgotten about Tansill in the last few hours, and it irked him to run into the man at this stage of the game.

"I don't know, Mart," drawled Tansill. "Wasn't that Tirone's body you had on top of the coach?"

"It was."

"So Tirone's dead? If I kill you I won't be able to collect for it now. Maybe I'll let you live, Mart."

"Make your move, or get out," Renner said. "I've got things to do, Coke."

"Busy man, ain't you?" Tansill drawled. "But don't rush me, Mart. This takes some thinkin'."

"Thinking, hell! Let's get this done with. It's been waiting quite a while."

"Kinda hate to do it. Always liked you in a way, Mart. And now that you ain't worth a thousand dollars to me dead, I don't hardly know."

"Draw or get out, goddamn you!" Renner said, with soft intensity.

"Can't make up my mind, Mart."

"I ought to give it to you anyway. It'll come sometime."

Tansill slowly shook his head. "Once I wanted you real bad. Now I've kinda lost that feelin'. What happened down in Chihuahua don't seem so important any more."

"You talk too much, Coke," said Renner. "Fill your hand or move out of this valley."

"You're tough, Mart," drawled Tansill. "You've turned into a real killer. It's kinda too bad. . . . But you can't run me out of the country."

"I'll kill you then," Renner said. "Go for your gun, Coke."

He was ready, and Tansill wasn't quite certain. It gave Renner a slight edge. He recalled what Glenway had told him. Be sure, know what you're going to do. It isn't how fast a man is, it's how his nerve and confidence hold up. After practice the draw's automatic, your arm and hand and fingers do the work. The gun's part of them, part of you, and you aim and fire with all of your brain and body. . . .

"Get to it, Coke," said Renner, ruthless and vicious as never before, eyes bitter green.

Coke Tansill sighed. "If you insist, Mart, there's no way out of it." He was smiling as his hand flicked into motion.

But Renner was ahead of him, swifter and surer than he'd ever been, far enough ahead to swerve the barrel to the left and let go at Tansill's gun arm, the flame roaring out and the .44 jerking up against his wrist. Tansill's pistol flew clear, slithering in the dirt, and his body spun halfway round with the smashing force of the slug. Wheeling back to face Renner, his right arm shattered and dripping red as it dangled, Tansill stood shocked and incredulous, left hand poised near the weapon on his left thigh.

"You ain't that good, Mart," said Coke Tansill, in mild complaint.

"I was this time, Coke," said Renner. "You reaching for the other one?"

Tansill considered and shook his blond head. "What the hell? I know when I'm licked, Mart. But I can't figure you beatin' me that far, boy."

Renner stepped forward and lifted the left-hand gun from Tansill's holster, sheathing his own Colt and picking up the one on the ground. "You know Doc Seabrey's on the other side of the square, Coke? Well, get along out there and let Doc take care of that arm."

"Shoulda known better," mumbled Tansill, pale and sick from shock. "Wasn't primed for this one, Mart. Didn't have that feelin' you got to have. . . . Nice of you to go

for my arm. But dangerous, Mart. You could get yourself killed doin' that."

"Not today, Coke," said Martin Renner. "I've got something to do here. I guess nobody could keep me from it."

Renner halted before the jailhouse, and Tansill went wavering on toward the doctor's, left hand clasped to his bleeding right arm.

"Your guns'll be in the sheriff's office, Coke," called Renner.

"Much obliged, Mart," said Tansill, trudging unsteadily onward, still dazed and unbelieving.

A thin whiplash of a man in a dusty black suit was waiting in the doorway of the brick building. He had bright blue eyes in an angular-boned face, a grim hard mouth and rocklike jaws. The cigar he was smoking looked enormous in his lean gaunt features. The gold shield of a federal marshal glittered on his vest, but Renner knew it was Kolloway before he saw that badge.

"He one of them?" The marshal nodded after Tansill.

"He worked for Mill Iron, but this was personal," Renner said.

"You don't want him arrested then?"

"No. He'll be leaving here anyway, I think. He wasn't mixed up in any of it. Just something between him and me, Marshal."

Kolloway went back to his chair, drank from a large tin cup of coffee, and leaned back with his boots on the desk, surveying Renner with those keen blue eyes. "You're Martin Renner?"

"That's right." Renner laid Tansill's matched guns on the desk.

"Have you killed them all now?"

"The big one's still alive."

"Let's take him alive," Kolloway suggested dryly. "Like to have one of them that can do some talking."

Renner inclined his tawny copper-streaked head. "I'm all for that."

"I suppose you got Tirone?"

Renner nodded another inch.

"You've cut quite a swath here, son," Kolloway said. "But

so far as I can see you haven't killed anyone who didn't fully deserve to die. I have warrants for Tirone, Mrs. Renner, Herne and his gunmen. Herne's out back in a cell now. The others, except for the woman, are dead. . . . I also have a warrant for Guy Ormond. I imagine he's the big one you referred to?"

"He's the one," Renner said. "Where's Sheriff Sullers?"

"Well, I sent him home for the time being." Kolloway smiled. "He was in bad shape, and the place smells better without him. I think he'll probably decide to leave the Don-drino—if he doesn't land in jail himself. There's no doubt that you're the legal heir to Mill Iron and all of your father's estate."

Renner was silent, shaping up a cigarette.

Kolloway went on: "Suppose you sit down and tell me your whole story, Renner, and then we'll make a call on Mr. Guy Ormond. We don't approve of private citizens enforcing the law at gunpoint, as a general rule, but in a situation like this it might have been justifiable. After you tell me about it, Renner, I'll know for sure."

"We had to fight—and kill. Or get killed ourselves."

"What interest brought Blue and Shelby into this matter anyway?"

"They're my friends, Marshal," said Martin Renner simply. "And Shelby's father was killed too."

Kolloway nodded understandingly. "Dr. Seabrey's your friend too. His detailed report prompted the investigation we have just completed."

"Find out anything about the rustling?"

"Considerable, son," Kolloway said, puffing on the big cigar. "Mill Iron was running off the stock, and Herne had a crew up north altering brands and driving the cattle into Colorado to sell there."

"About what we thought," Renner said. "But we couldn't get any proof of it."

Kolloway smiled gravely. "Maybe you boys had enough to do, without running down all the rustlers in Utah Territory. Well, let's have the story, Renner. I don't think I'll be able to charge you with anything outside of usurping

the legal duties on local and federal authorities. Matter of fact, you and your pardners probably ought to get a good big bounty."

XXI

AN hour later, after breakfast in the Brock House dining room, Marshal Kolloway and Martin Renner were walking out toward the home of Guy Ormond, at the southeast corner of the community. The word had got around somehow, as soon as Brandvil awakened that morning, and a curious crowd trailed the marshal and Renner at a respectful distance, despite Kolloway's command to disperse and go home.

The town was humming with news, rumors and excitement. Dake Tirone and Ushkow were dead, and Fewster was wounded at Mill Iron. Doc Seabrey's private hospital was filled with gunshot cases: Mulcahy and Prager and Tansill on one side, Benny Blue and young Shelby from the other. Black Jack Herne was in jail, and a U.S. marshal was on his way to arrest Guy Ormond, the highly respected banker and real estate dealer. Rawhide Renner's death two years back had been murder instead of suicide, and Mart Renner was the rightful owner of Mill Iron and the rest of Rawhide's property. . . . Tirone and Herne had been behind all the cattle stealing in the region. Cynthia Renner had gone out of her head when Mart shot Tirone to death, and she was being kept under drugs at the doctor's. Sheriff Abel Sullers was in total disgrace, and likely to end up behind bars. The Crystal Castle was shut down tight, padlocked by federal law.

Martin Renner, towering big and rangy, rawboned and battle-grimed, above the neat wire-thin Kolloway, felt light-headed and giddy. He was sweating as he walked, and in spite of the food he'd eaten there was a hollow gnawing sickness under his belt. Renner saw things to the finest detail, yet none of them seemed real or normal. A sense of unreality clothed everything about him, and he was like a man striving vainly to awake from a bad dream.

It was a relief to know that Emily Hale was sound asleep

at Doc Seabrey's, and that Shelby and Benny were there in the doctor's care. Also that Coke Tansill wouldn't be coming at him with a gun. But Renner dreaded what lay before them at the Ormond house.

The slanting light of the early sun was still tinged with crimson, and the morning shadows on the western side of buildings were cool blue and delicate lavender. The cottonwoods along the way stood out sharply in Renner's vision, even to the tiny veins of the long narrow leaves. When he lowered his burning eyes, Renner was aware of varicolored pebbles in the gravel, horse droppings, weathered planks in the walk, and separate stalks of bleached grass. He saw everything in infinite detail, yet none of it looked natural, nothing had the substance of reality.

His mouth was dry, his throat ached tautly, and a peculiar numbness gripped his limbs. The scent of gunpowder would never clear from his head. His scalp crawled under the hat, and chilling flickers traced his spinal column. The measured tread of their boots sounded faint and far away, and behind them was the slow tramp and hushed murmur of the crowd that persisted in following.

"You all right, Martin?" asked Kolloway.

"I'm all right."

"You don't have to come on this one. You've done more than your share."

"I want to," Renner said. "I've got to. Maybe I can talk to him, Marshal."

"Will he fight?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I should handle this myself—alone," Kolloway said.

"Hate to have him killed, Marshal," said Renner. "He was a good man, a good friend—once."

The house was in sight now, with the reddish gold ball of the sun above it, facing the town, the back porch overlooking the Dondrino River. Compactly built of whitewashed brick on a natural terrace, with a white picket fence about the large sloping yard. A spacious home for a bachelor, the interior pleasant and serene with fine furniture, good books, old paintings, all the essentials for cultured, gracious living . . . The home of a thief and a murderer. Renner was still

unable to believe and accept this. Guy would have some explanation, clear himself in some convincing manner.

The gate in the picket fence creaked as it swung open under Renner's reluctant hand. A long gravel walk lined with redstone boulders rose gradually before them to the severe front entrance. Renner remembered happy times in this house, lavish dinners, quiet evenings by the fireplace, listening to Guy's stories or reading his books. . . . Often it had seemed more like home than either Rawhide's town house or the ranch house at Mill Iron.

The door opened and Guy Ormond came out, and Renner knew then it was true beyond any doubt. For Guy carried a long heavy rifle, a .56 Sharps buffalo gun, the weapon that had killed Rawhide Renner out by Sangaree Swamp, and Martin's coyote dun in the passage of Red Gap. His gray head bare, his beard trimmed to perfection, Guy Ormond looked as dignified, noble and distinguished as ever.

"Don't come any closer, gentlemen," he said calmly, raising the rifle. And Renner was surprised to find it aimed more at Kolloway than at himself. There was an awed murmur from the spectators scattered in the background, and Renner felt as sorry for Guy Ormond as he ever had felt for any human being.

"We'd better pull out, Mart, and do this a little different," Kolloway suggested easily.

"You hang back, Marshal," said Renner. "I want to get it over with. I got a hunch I can do it—by myself. Without using a gun."

"I can't let you risk it, boy."

"You've got to," Renner said quietly. "It's my job. I want to do it—my way. And I'm going to, Marshal."

"That cannon will blow a man in two," Kolloway muttered.

"I can beat him to the trigger—if I have to."

Kolloway shrugged and sighed. "I don't like it, son, but I guess you're set on it. Don't crowd your luck though. I'll try to cover you from here, but it's a long shot with a hand gun."

"Thanks, Marshal. I'll be all right."

There was a hushed silence, the pressure building into un-

bearable tension, as Mart Renner started pacing deliberately forward up that long rising pathway, his guns still sheathed. . . . Walking straight and slow into the gaping muzzle of that Sharps.

"Stop, boy, *stop!*" cried Ormond, his composure cracking for the first time. "Don't come any farther, Martin!"

"Put it down, Guy," Renner said softly. "It's all over. Drop that rifle." He was still climbing, calm and unhurried on the surface, but all aquiver inside.

"Stop, you damned fool!" Ormond raised the butt to his shoulder and took aim, but Renner went on, slow stride after stride, boots crunching the gravel, long arms swinging loose and clear. Ormond's voice became a hoarse screech: "I'll blow your goddamned head off!"

"No, Guy." Renner's tone was kind and gentle, as if he spoke to an unruly child. "You've done enough, Guy. More than you ever meant to." Renner didn't want to kill him, but he would if he had to. Guy's eyes would tell when he was actually ready to pull the trigger, and Renner would have to draw and hit the dirt as he fired, lightning fast. It would be a close thing. He felt better when he observed Ormond breaking a bit under the strain. "You've killed enough, Guy," he said.

The man's regal features seemed to crumble and disintegrate, his eyes wavering and blurring, the Sharps trembling in his grasp. He lowered the barrel a trifle, shaking his proud gray head.

"Why did you do it, Guy?" asked Renner, still moving leisurely toward him. "How could you do it, Guy? To a man like my father—your best friend."

Ormond groaned. "I had to, boy. Investments went bad. Everything went wrong in 1873. The squeeze was on me. I couldn't face being broke and disgraced. . . . But don't try to take me, Mart. Hold it right there!"

These two were alone in the world now. Kolloway and the swelling crowd behind him had ceased to exist.

"Put down the gun, Guy," said Renner, with quiet, pleading insistence. "We don't want to shoot you, Guy. And you don't want to kill—any more."

"Why not, boy? What have I got to lose now?" A spasm

distorted the bearded face, and Guy Ormond snapped the rifle to his shoulder again. The onlookers stopped breathing, and Renner was chilled through by the nearness of death, ready to draw and drop flat as he triggered. Behind and below at the foot of the path, Marshal Kolloway held his pistol cocked and poised.

The Sharps exploded with a great bellowing boom, the fiery blast passing high over Renner's head as he drew and dropped to the gravel, rising instantly and holding his fire as he realized that Guy had shot at the marshal instead of him, and had hit nobody. Blinded and deafened, Renner strode onward with Colt in hand, blocking the way so that Kolloway had to aim wide of the mark, his bullet crashing through a windowpane beside the entrance.

"No, *by God, never!*" The words burst from Ormond's throat, and he threw down the old buffalo gun. Turning and running into the house, he slammed the door shut after him.

Renner sprang forward, driving his legs with desperate power and speed. His shoulder struck the door, scalding where that slug of Cynthia's had creased his upper arm. His left hand gripped the knob, and a muffled report sounded from within the brick walls. Too late.

Renner threw the door open and halted on the threshold, stark and staring. Guy Ormond was stretched out on the hardwood floor, a revolver at his side, a dark red stain spreading on the fine pleated linen of his white shirt. He was still alive and conscious, his tortured eyes fixed on Renner, but he was a dying man.

"Sorry, boy," he gasped feebly. "God forgive me—son. Send the marshal in. I'll—tell him—everything."

"I wanted to take you alive, Guy," said Renner dully.

"Better—this way. Goodby—Martin."

"Goodby, Guy."

Renner turned away, choking with nausea, and met Kolloway on the porch. "He can talk—a little. He asked for you, Marshal. I'll see you in town."

Kolloway nodded and clapped Renner's wide rangy back. "You're all right, Mart. They don't come any better. Old Rawhide would be mighty proud."

Renner forced a faint smile and went on down the graveled walk, numb and hollow with exhaustion. The gun was still hanging in his hand. He looked at it, thankful that he hadn't had to use it, and slid the Colt .44 back into the smooth-worn leather. Maybe you can stay in there now, he thought. Thank God it's over, at last. I never want to use a gun again as long as I live. If there's any fighting to be done, I'll hire somebody like Coke Tansill to do it. Perhaps I'd better keep Coke on at Mill Iron, just in case.

He went through the gate and along the street toward the square, unaware of the awed staring townspeople who made way for him and looked after him with respect and wonder.

He wanted to get back to Emily Hale, with her tilted gold-brown eyes and her sweet full lips. Back to little old Benny Blue with his broken arm, and handsome young Hildebrand Shelby with his wounded shoulder, and Doc Seabrey himself with that brute face and soft eyes and voice. Renner belonged with them and nobody else.

It seemed a long way in the morning sunshine. The guns dragged heavily on his thighs, and his knees jacked weakly. Renner was swaying and staggering with utter weariness. He hoped his eyes would stay open and his legs hold up, until he got to Doc's place.

Someone had brought the story in already, the story that would become a legend of the Dondrino, and people were watching Martin Renner from the sidewalks, doorways and windows along Front Street and all around the square. Renner wished they wouldn't stare so, but he was too tired to feel anger, resentment or anything else. Let them look. They used to look at old Rawhide this way. Maybe he'd get used to it, after a while.

A man came out of the Alhambra and pressed a full bottle of whiskey into his hand, and it wasn't until Renner had pulled the cork and taken a swig that he recognized Ivy Wingate, the spare sour-faced owner of the Running W.

"Why, thanks, Ivy," said Renner, in surprise. "I sure needed that one." He tried to hand back the bottle, but the rancher waved it away.

"It's yours, Mart," said Wingate. "You sure to God earned

it, and a whole hell of a lot more. My hat's off to you, son, and every man in this valley owes you his thanks. I reckon we'll get along, when you take over Mill Iron."

"Why, sure, Ivy," said Renner. "And thanks 'again. The boys at Doc's will appreciate this, too."

Martin Renner went on with a little more strength and assurance, the whiskey warming through him and the bottle in his hand. It wasn't far now. Emily Hale would be waiting for him at the doctor's. Benny Blue and Shelby and Seabrey were there, too. . . . A few drinks and then a good bed and a long sleep. And waking to know that Em was there under the same roof, and would always be with him the rest of his life.

And maybe old Rawhide Renner was watching from somewhere above, with no more contempt in his deep, stormy eyes. Looking at Martin Renner with the love and pride of a father for his son, and the respect of one strong man for another.

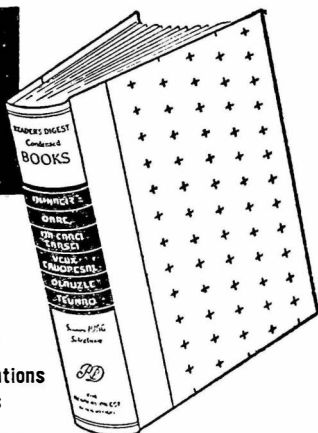
A door opened and Emily Hale stood on the front porch of Doc's house, and Renner smiled and lengthened his strides in her direction.

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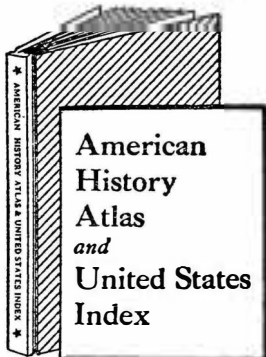
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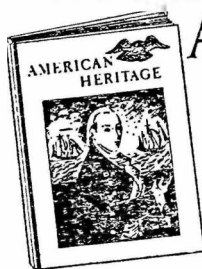
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TIRONE—NOW I'M
GOING TO KILL YOU!"**

Flame tongued from the door of the coach. Lead sang, and seared Renner's arm as Cynthia's small-calibered pistol cracked. Tirone's hand was blurring across his chest to the shoulder holster.

Stunned by the sneak shot, Renner recovered and reached with smooth speed. His heavy Colt kicked up hard with the explosion.

The muzzle blasts came together and blended in one terrific roar. Renner felt the scorching breath of the bullet and saw Tirone fall backwards, splashing the water and then drifting limply with the river current. Cynthia shrieked and Renner whirled towards her.

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IT TOO!" HE ORDERED.**

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