



A.N.C.

ACTION

STORIES

WINTER

20c

TRADE MARK REG.

THE
WORLD'S BEST
FAST-MOVING
FICTION



JACK LONDON'S

classic of the hurricane-flung pearl . . .

HOUSE OF MAPUHI

"YORE NAME'S ON A
HUNDRED BULLETS!"

by Tommy
Thompson

Anderson

*She brewed a Colt-gun caldron,
baited it with a slashed Green Mask—*

GUN-WITCH OF HOODOO RANGE

A big new "SEÑORITA SCORPION" novel!

WINTER — 1948

20c per copy
\$0.80 per year



Vol. XIX

No. 2

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Gen'l Mgr. & Editor

"YORE NAME'S ON A HUNDRED BULLETS!" . Thomas Thompson 4
Full-length Novel of the great Southwest

A blood-crazed mob moved into the California hills. Eyes blazing, knives honed, guns lead-heavy, they swore screaming agony and slow-death—for a weaponless girl who cowered wild-eyed in the brush.

THE DUDE HANGS HIGH Joe Chadwick 32

He wuz a hongry-lookin' critter from the East a-ways—plumb anxious tuh ride into every kinda trouble like a real cowpoke. The great and glorious West didn't disappoint him none!

THE COLONEL'S COLTS M. Howard Lane 50

Gleaming like polished jewels in their case, one's fingers ached to curl lovingly about their triggers. Yet the dead Colonel's bookish weakling son swore they would never be fired.

LAST STAND OF A LAW DOG Walter A. Tompkins 62

Old Giff Cragg didn't mind age crippling his magic gun, but he sure aimed to turn in a clean badge—bright enough for any killer to see himself by gunflame.

THIRSTY TRIGGERS Lee Floren 77

Barr Stackpool had the cattle. Jim Smith had the water. Big Dan Reynolds had only memories. But they all had guns.

THE HOUSE OF MAPUHI Jack London 84

America's master story-teller creates a screaming super-hurricane and then plunges into its black maw a helpless, naked human with only one resource—a grim, fanatical will to live. Can either side win such a titanic struggle?

BADMAN'S BRITCHES Allan K. Echols 97

Any ornery, owl-hootin' son could shoot up a bank and gun-whip helpless folks, the way El Toro did. But only one hombre was fit to wear his pants.

GUN-WITCH OF HOODOO RANGE Emmett McDowell 102

A Senorita Scorpion Novel

Burly Jess Morgan stared numbly at his grass swept clean of cattle, the smoking ruins of his ranch, the stiffening bodies of his crew. Was this the work of the famous Senorita Scorpion—the girl Robin Hood of the West?



THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE



ACTION STORIES: Published quarterly by FICTION HOUSE, INC., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Registered as second class matter January 26, 1937, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. This is a magazine of fiction. The characters named and incidents described do not refer to any actual person. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1948, by Fiction House, Inc. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U.S.A.



Burly Jess Morgan stared numbly at his grass swept clean of cattle, the smoking ruins of his ranch, the stiffening bodies of his crew. Was this the work of the famous Senorita Scorpion—the girl Robin Hood of the Southwest?

JESS MORGAN TURNED A bland pale-eyed stare on his foreman. "Looks like they're heading for the Mexican border. 'Bout three hundred head, I'd judge from the tracks, driven hard by five maybe six men. It's Cabrera's work, all right."

"Well?" demanded Pink Ferguson, reining his horse alongside Morgan, "what are you going to do?"

Jess lifted himself in the saddle, squinting down the broad shimmering emptiness of Sulphur Spring Valley. The ragged blue peaks of the Chiricahuas hung threat-

Gun-Witch Of Hoodoo Range

By Emmett McDowell

He fell forward across the fire, his gun dropping from nerveless fingers.



eningly over the two men like a tidal wave. The Dragoons to the west were a thin violet line on the desert's horizon.

"If it's Cabrera," Jess said thoughtfully, "he'll swing around the foot of the Swisshelms into the San Bernardino Valley gathering cattle as he goes."

"Then what are we sittin' here for?" Ferguson demanded angrily. "He ain't but a few hours ahead."

Morgan smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. He was a large chunky man of twenty-five or thereabouts

with a square likeable face blackened by wind and sun.

"You ride back to the 10X, Pink, and get the men. Send Billy Rupp over to the CCC for Ernie Rafflock. Reckon some of Ernie's cattle'll be in that herd. Then hightail it back here. I'm sticking on Cabrera's tail."

Ferguson scowled. He was a lantern-jawed, red-haired man a little older than Morgan.

"Damn it, Jess, Cabrera's a fox. You ride into a trap and you wouldn't stand a

chance——” He broke off as Morgan began to smile again. “All right, all right,” he said hastily. “But don’t crowd him, Jess.” He wheeled his horse, spurred up the valley.

Jess Morgan was mounted on a buckskin, a big rangy animal standing all of sixteen hands. Jess turned him into the trail of the stolen cattle, urged him into a trot. The buckskin had a reaching foot, but man and horse seemed to crawl along the foot of the mountain leaving a tiny explosive trail of dust. The tracks of the stolen cattle stretched south straight as a string.

It was following the pattern—a pattern that had become only too familiar to Jess since coming to this southeastern corner of Arizona Territory. A few more such raids and he’d not have a head of stock left.

Near the mouth of Wolf Spring Canyon, Jess caught sight of cattle in the brush-choked coulees. Stringy longhorns, wild as antelope. They appeared singly at first, but farther along they were in small bunches.

He whistled soundlessly, swerved close enough to recognize his own 10X brand on their ribs. The next bunch were blaze-face Herefords and bore the Coronado Land and Cattle Company’s CCC. The rustlers must have cut Rafflock’s wire to get at those.

This obviously was the herd that Cabrera had been trying to make off with. But what had stopped him?

Reining the buckskin to a walk, Jess leaned from the saddle and studied the scuff marks in the sandy soil. Once he dismounted and cast about on foot, head bent, walking with the short choppy steps of the habitual rider.

“I’ll be damned,” he muttered in a mild voice.

From the sign it looked as if the raiders had run into a party of horsemen riding up from the south. Cabrera had abandoned the stolen cattle, engaged in a running fight as he fled towards Wolf Spring Canyon.

The breeze veered suddenly, bringing with it the distant rattle of shots.

Morgan’s head lifted. He heard another report, louder, and then a pause followed by a ragged burst of firing.

By George, he thought, it sounds like a gunfight. Cabrera and his men must be holed up in Wolf Spring Canyon!

Tom Hunter’s cabin, he knew, was located about a mile up the canyon where the hard-bitten ex-buffalo skinner had homesteaded some of the best water in the territory. Cabrera might have forted up there.

Old Tom had a bad name anyway. Nothing that could be proved. But he didn’t welcome visitors. There was a good deal of talk about Hunter and Big Ben Ash, another two bit rancher a few miles to the south . . .

The breeze died, the rattle dying with it.

Jess vaulted to the saddle, raking the buckskin with his spurs. Except for the scattered cattle and a lone buzzard spiraling in the updraft of the mountains, the valley itself still appeared deserted.

JESS MORGAN had drifted to Arizona in ’81, a mild-mannered, soft-spoken Texan with an eye like blue flint and a driving passion to run his own cattle on his own land. He looked an easy mark and more than one person had made the fatal mistake of taking him at face value.

In Texas the best land was taken. He was shrewd enough to see that cowhands generally remained cowhands—in Texas. But Arizona was raw and new and there was land for the taking. Land, but not many cattle.

Jess had driven three herds from cattle-poor Texas across New Mexico into Arizona. On the last drive he’d run into Rube Holden in Tucson.

Rube had been a small rancher on the Brazos, Jess’ home country. He had made the drive to Arizona two years before settling in the Chiricahuas on the edge of Sulphur Spring Valley. But when Jess met him, he was in Tucson, broke, his cattle gone, his wife killed by Apaches.

“Son,” he’d told Jess. “It’s the finest cattle country you ever seen. Only there ain’t no cattle. What the outlaws don’t get, the *ladrons* do, if them damned nesters or bronco ’paches don’t butcher ’em first.”

But he had sold Jess the land.

Morgan smiled thinly, the sun striking sparks from his narrowed blue eyes. He’d

gone into this with his eyes open and, by George, if he had to go to herding jack-rabbits, he was sticking.

He was still a quarter mile from the broad grassy mouth of Wolf Spring Canyon when a rider on a pinto burst suddenly from the sycamore screened draw. They saw each other at the same instant. The strange rider gave no sign but flung his horse at right angles, spurred south.

The sun was higher, hotter. Jess could see dust spurt up from the pinto's driving hooves. The stranger seemed in a powerful hurry to get away from there, hunched over the pony's shoulders like a jockey.

Too big a hurry, considering the morning's events.

Jess yelled and swerved to head him off, sandwiching him against the rocky slope of the mountain.

The man came straight on. He looked like a Mexican in black doeskin *chivarras* and a peaked sombrero. They were only a hundred yards apart when the Mexican's arm swept up and a gray-black toadstool puffed suddenly from his fist.

Jess heard the report a fraction of a second later.

The Mexican fired again. The slug hit Jess' saddle horn, went screaming across the valley. Something plucked at his sleeve. The whine of a fourth shot zinged past his ear like a hornet.

Morgan's eyes had blackened to indigo. He hauled up the buckskin, hit the ground on the off side, running, and yanked the Colt from his holster. His horse was plunging skittishly. Jess leveled the long barrelled 44.40 beneath its neck.

The Mex must pass within forty yards of him. Then Jess caught him in the sights. His finger whitened on the trigger.

At that moment the wind tore off the Mexican's sombrero and Jess saw that he was wearing a hood. A green silk hood that covered head and neck!

Only it wasn't a he—it was a she!

A STONISHMENT held his trigger finger, and the next instant the girl was past in a cloud of dust. A lithe slim figure in the tight Mexican *chivarras* and loose white cotton *camisa*. One side of her blouse was streaked with scarlet.

Wounded!

Jess vaulted back into the saddle intending to overtake her, but she twisted around, fired twice. The slugs buzzed uncomfortably close. He flinched, pulled up the buckskin.

He couldn't shoot. But the girl in the green silk hood was troubled by no such scruple.

Jess sat his nervous mount, watching her dwindle into doll size. He thought he saw her reel in the saddle but she caught herself. She might be bad hit, and he half considered trailing her out of gunshot range. Then she disappeared around a spur of the mountain.

He wouldn't forget her. The odd green hood. The cat-like grace with which she clung to the pinto's shoulders. Good Lord, who could have shot her? And why? Abruptly he reined the buckskin around.

All hell must be breaking loose up Wolf Spring Canyon!

The sun glinted from the pools of water in the half dry creek, turned the milky inner back of the sycamores luminous. It was hot—hot with that dry shimmering heat of mid-summer in Arizona. Morgan wiped dust and sweat from his face with a red bandana, wiped his palms. He was allowing the buckskin to pick his own way up the canyon at a cautious walk.

He couldn't rid his mind of the girl in the hood. Old Tom Hunter had a daughter, but he couldn't imagine Meg Hunter in a get-up like that. He didn't know of any other girls in the region.

There were plenty of women in Tombstone and Bisbee, in the hog ranches and dance halls. Adventuresses drawn by the smell of money . . .

Something clicked in Jess' brain. Tombstone! He'd heard of a girl in one of the Mexican dance halls on lower Allen Street who always wore a mask. No one ever saw her without it. She even slept in it.

El Escorpion, Senorita Scorpion! That was her name. The girl in the green silk hood!

There was a story about her, he recalled. She was young and pretty, and she'd stolen a man from Cherokee Annie. Annie wasn't a girl to take a thing like that lying down. Annie had rammed a broken beer bottle into the Scorpion's face.

Senorita Scorpion had recovered her health but not her looks. For a while

she'd dropped out of sight, then she'd reappeared wearing a fitted green silk mask. She'd had plenty besides a pretty face, and she hadn't minded showing it to the best advantage. The mask had added just the right note of wickedness. In a week the Scorpion had become the sensation of Allen Street . . .

Jess' horse suddenly snorted, picked up his ears. He was off him like a shot, lunging for his head, clamping his hand over his nostrils.

From up the canyon came the faint sound of a shout. Then he heard a woman scream piercingly, again and again, her cries echoing, reverberating from wall to wall.

Jess could feel the hair on the nape of his neck lift like the hackles of a dog. The pure yellow sunlight spilling into the canyon lent a peculiar note of horror to the cries.

He tethered the buckskin in a *motte* of cottonwoods. Then he began to run up the trail, awkward in his high heeled half-boots, the Colt in his hand.

As he closed the distance he caught the rumble of men's voices. Suddenly the trail opened into a grassy park. Jess slid behind a sycamore, staring at the scene in the clearing.

Fifty yards off an older woman sat on the ground, her apron over her head, rocking her shoulders in a spasm of grief. Tom Hunter's yellow-haired daughter stood motionless in the grip of two men, staring at a writhing figure that dangled from the limb of a cottonwood.

The kicking form spun slowly until Jess could see the blackening face and protruding tongue. It was old Tom Hunter himself!

And they were hanging him in front of his wife and daughter!

Impulsively, Jess raised the Colt, steadying it across his crooked forearm, took careful aim at the rope . . .

And fired.

II

IN THAT CANYON THE REPORT multiplied itself into a fusillade. Acrid black powder spewed from the muzzle, drifted back into Jess' nostrils.

Six inches from the limb, the rope

parted. Hunter fell like a sack of wheat to the ground and lay motionless.

Meg Hunter was the first to recover her senses. She jerked free of the startled men, flung herself on her father, loosened the noose about his throat.

"Ma!" she cried. "Ma, he's still alive!"

The woman scrambled to her feet, flew to old Tom's side.

There were four men standing about the tree staring towards Morgan, who recognized them as CCC riders—Dodge, the Coronado Cattle Company straw boss, and three others whose names Jess didn't know. Their hands were sliding towards their guns.

"I wouldn't fool around them guns," Jess sang out cheerfully. "They might be loaded."

The downward motion of their hands stopped.

"Who are you?" Dodge demanded in a high harsh voice. "Show yourself." He was a thin hatchet-faced man, bow-legged and wearing two bone-handled revolvers.

Jess stepped out from behind the sycamore. "What's the trouble, Dodge?"

Dodge's eyes glittered angrily. They were pale gray like sea water, his mouth a down curving slice.

"What call'd you have to butt in?"

"Why, Dodge, I didn't know you'd been elected public hangman."

Dodge looked not quite so certain of himself.

"He's a damned murdering rustler an' we caught him red-handed—"

"That's a lie!" Meg cried passionately, looking up from where she and her mother were working over Hunter.

"So you say!"

The other men eyed Morgan, their faces expressionless. There was something dangerous in the way they stood, legs spread, knees bent a little as if about to explode into violent action.

Beyond them Jess could see the big double log cabin with a roofed dog-trot between its two halves, and behind that the pole corral and barn. Three cowponies stood hip sprung in the bare dirt of the corral switching at flies.

His eyes darkened suddenly. Another man sprawled grotesquely on his face behind the pole fence, looking like nothing so much as a bundle of rags.

"Your boss is on the way here," he told Dodge. "I sent for Rafflock when we cut Cabrera's trail."

"How'd you know it was Cabrera?"

"Had all the earmarks."

Dodge nodded. "Reckon it did. We blundered into him out in the valley gathering up everything he could find. He cut an' run. Holed up in Hunter's cabin. Old Tom was with him."

"He was not!" Meg said.

Jess let his eyes slide over the unconscious man. Hunter lay on his back, breathing in labored gasps. His bald head glistened with sweat. His gray, bushy and tobacco stained beard was matted with dust. Brogans encased his sockless feet and he was wearing a hickory shirt and overall pants that a respectable cowhand wouldn't be caught dead in.

A two-bit rancher, Jess sized him up; shiftless, hating the big cattlemen who were squeezing out him and his kind. Hating them enough to throw in with the lawless element.

"Did you see him with Cabrera?"

"No," Dodge admitted. "But we sure heard him an' that old Sharps of his'n. He shot Andy Jenkins from the cabin. Got him dead between the eyes. That big fifty blew out Andy's brains like an egg out'n its shell."

Meg looked sick but said stoutly, "Why wouldn't he fight? You all were shooting into the cabin. You didn't care who you hit."

Dodge ignored her. "We got Cabrera and one of his men through the chinks. They're lying in the cabin now. The others sneaked out afoot. All except the girl. She made a ride for it and got clean away."

"What girl?"

"Senorita Scorpion. You know, that dance-hall gal who runs around in the fancy green mask. She was with Cabrera. She may have caught a bullet; I ain't certain."

"What about old Tom here?"

"He tried to ride for it like the girl. Bud shot his horse out from under him, an' we grabbed him." Dodge swung suddenly on Meg. "There ain't no call to work on him no more, Miss. We're stringing him back up to that cotton-wood!"

MEG HUNTER drew in her breath. Her face was bloodless beneath its tan, her dark gray eyes sick, horrified.

She was a tall girl, Jess realized, almost as tall as himself and taller than Dodge. Her yellow hair had come undone. There was dirt on her face, dirt on her tight, dove-gray bodice.

"But Pap wasn't with them!" she protested.

Dodge looked at her, letting his silence answer. There was some quality about the gunman, implacable, deadly as a rattlesnake, that took the heart out of the girl.

Jess could feel the hostility of the CCC riders, the cold watchful stare of Dodge. He grinned crookedly and then said in a mild voice, "No, Miss. We're taking him to Tombstone for trial."

The silence that greeted Jess' announcement was explosive. Dodge's eyes flattened, and he gave Jess an ugly stare. He saw a burly man who looked soft and slow, a man who'd avoid trouble. He turned back to the CCC hands, barked sharply, a little contemptuously, "String Hunter up! And if Morgan objects——"

That's as far as he got.

The long-barrelled Colt was still dangling from Morgan's hand. He pounced like a cat. There was no preparation, no warning. From a flat-footed stance, he leaped at Dodge, chopped him behind the ear with the heavy barrel.

The blow made a dull "crack!" It knocked Dodge's head out from under his hat, split his scalp. The gunman pitched limply to his face.

"Anybody else want to hang old Tom?"

The three riders found themselves staring into Jess' cold blue eyes above the muzzle of his revolver. They went rigid.

"It's yore deal."

"Why, then," said Jess, "unbuckle your belts and let 'em slide, one at a time. You, on the left, first."

Silently they complied and stepped back, regarding Jess with a surprised sort of anger and sheepishness. The silence spun out like a spider web.

It was broken by the shrill neighing of a horse from down the canyon.

Ernie Rafflock, superintendent-foreman of the Coronado Cattle Company, appeared first in the trail. Rafflock was a big man on a big gray horse. Besides

managing the CCC, he had his own ranch in the Swisshelms, a few miles south of Wolf Spring Canyon.

Pink Ferguson rode a little behind Rafflock, anxious-faced, crowding the CCC boss. Pink was followed by two more Coronado hands.

At sight of Jess, Pink slid from the saddle, leaving his reins trailing.

"Gawd a'mighty, what happened? What you been doing?"

Jess said, "How the hell did you get here so quick?"

"Didn't have to go to the ranch. Met Mr. Rafflock trailing Cabrera. Him an' a couple of his hands."

Rafflock dismounted ponderously, a scowl on his face, and nodded at Jess. He must have weighed all of two hundred pounds, and his feet in hand-tailored, high-heeled boots looked tiny and incongruous. His black eyes, alive as coals, had taken in the scene instantly—Dodge and Hunter stretched unconscious on the ground, the two women fussing over Hunter, his own unarmed riders, even the dead man a hundred yards off.

He didn't say anything, but looked at Jess pointedly for an explanation.

"There was a slight difference of opinion." Jess grinned, but he didn't holster his gun. "Your *segundo* wanted to hang old Tom. In fact, he did—almost."

Surprise deepened the scowl in Rafflock's face, and he looked down at Dodge and then back at Jess.

"Cabrera?"

"Cabrera's dead. His woman got away though. Girl by the name of the Scorpion."

"The girl in the green silk hood?"

"Yes." Jess explained what had happened.

"I don't like it, but you're right," Rafflock admitted grudgingly. "Dodge went too far. We'll take Hunter into Tombstone for trial."

"But he didn't do anything!" Meg burst out.

Rafflock faced the girl with an inscrutable expression. "I'm sorry, Miss. But that's for a jury to decide."

MEG'S chin set in angry lines. "He won't have a chance against you. You with the law in your pocket! You'll frame him into Yuma. And then you can

buy up this homestead cheap, can't you?" Her tone was acid. "Or so you think! Well, let me tell you, Mr. Big, you won't gobble us up like you did the Fallices down in the Swisshelms and Henry Jackson and the Yances—"

"Meg!" her mother tried to stop her but the girl was past stopping.

"Get out! Get out!" Tears suddenly stung her eyes and she turned to Jess. "Mr. Morgan, you won't let them take Pap."

"He'll get a fair trial, Meg."

She flashed him a scornful glance. "You siding Rafflock? Did you ever hear of the mouse that set up housekeeping with the cat?"

An awkward silence got hold of them. In the midst of it old Tom groaned, struggled to his elbows. He turned bloodshot eyes on Rafflock, tried to speak but only a croak emerged.

Meg flew to the spring, came back with a gourd dipper of water. Hunter tried to drink.

"Faugh!" he sputtered and spat out a cud of tobacco. "Don't give a man a chance to spit out his chaw before you string him up." He drank painfully, the water spilling out the corners of his mouth.

"Who cut me down?"

"Morgan."

"Shore enough," Hunter wheezed. "Ain't you disappointed, Rafflock?"

Rafflock said suddenly, "Hunter, I'll give you five hundred dollars for your place and three days to get out of the country."

"That's damn white of you," Hunter began, his eyes red and furious.

"No, Tom!"

Everybody stared at Hunter's wife. She had risen to her feet and stood over her husband with a fierce protective look on her gaunt face like a hawk over its nest.

"But, Ma," Meg started to protest.

"We've done nothing to be afeared of," said the woman. "We'll take our chance with the law." She gave her husband a quick veiled glance.

Old Tom visibly brightened.

Jess Morgan, who never missed anything, made a mental note to keep his eyes open and his gun handy on the long ride into Tombstone.

COTTONWOOD HOLE lay on the eastern slopes of the Dragoons across the arid Sulphur Spring Valley. It was a favorite camping spot for the freighters hauling lumber from the saw-mills in the Chiricahuas to the booming town of Tombstone. But tonight there was no fire to light them in, Morgan saw, as he rode a little ahead of the others beneath the rustling cottonwoods.

A chill breeze had begun to whip across the desert with the setting of the sun. He shivered. The men were dark shapes watering their horses to the accompaniment of splashes and snorts.

It hadn't been a pleasant ride across the blistering desert. Old Tom had been taciturn and red-eyed, his feet lashed beneath his horse's belly. Dodge, sullen, furious, itching to start a fight and restrained only by the presence of Rafflock.

Once late in the afternoon, Jess had thought he'd seen dust. It might have been Mrs. Hunter, who had stayed on at the ranch until Meg could fetch Tobe and Curly Ash, the sons of a neighboring rancher, to look after things. Then she and Meg were supposed to come into Tombstone.

Jess frowned, built a cigarette. He let his eyes range the circle of firelight. Rafflock was squatting on his heels, talking earnestly in low tones to Dodge. He caught Jess' eye, beckoned him over.

Jess pushed himself to his feet, crossed the circle of firelight.

"Sit down, Morgan," Rafflock said. "Me'n Dodge want a word with you."

Jess squatted on his spurs.

Rafflock said, "Speak your piece, Dodge."

The gunman gave the CCC boss a sour look, turned back to Jess. "Morgan, I'm willing to forget that business back to the canyon. I was wrong, I reckon. At least, Ernie says so. But don't never hit me again—right or wrong."

"That's good with me," Jess said.

Rafflock's expression relaxed into joviality. "I don't want no trouble between you boys. Dodge here is my right hand." He lowered his voice. "Frankly, Morgan, I ain't been too sure of you."

Jess grinned but didn't interrupt.

"You land here with a passel of tough Texas hands. You talk real friendly but

you don't say much. I've kinda had an eye peeled in your direction."

"It don't hurt to be careful."

"No, it don't. But I'm satisfied and I reckon Wright and Finnerty will string along on my say-so. I want you to come in with us, Morgan."

Jess permitted surprise to show on his face. Dick Wright over in the San Pedro and Joe Finnerty in the San Simon were well-to-do ranchers, their spreads almost as big as the Coronado Land and Cattle Company.

"Come in on what?"

Rafflock's black eyes reflected little dancing flames. "How many cattle you lost, Morgan?"

"Damn near all of them."

"That's what I figured. It's got so an honest man can't run a cow unless he's hand in glove with the rustlers. Me'n Finnerty and Wright are organizing. We're gonna run out the damn thieves. Put the fear of God in 'em."

"The sheriff——" Jess began.

"Johnny Behan!" Rafflock snorted contemptuously. "He's too busy keeping up his political fences to chase cattle thieves. No, we got to wash our own dirty clothes."

"A vigilante committee?"

"Call it that if you like."

Jess built another cigarette. "Don't get me wrong," he told Rafflock hesitantly. "I'd be pleased to throw in with you. But I doubt if I'd be much help. My boys ain't been paid in three months——"

The scowl left Rafflock's forehead. "Hell," he interrupted, putting his hand on Jess' shoulder. "I figured that. I can let you have enough cash to tide you over."

Jess was genuinely surprised. "But——"

Rafflock slapped him on the back. "I don't aim to lose nothing, son. I collect my ten percent on the loan and cover myself with a mortgage on your place. I ain't lost any money yet through bad investments."

"I got to think about this," Jess said.

"Sure, sleep on it. If you take me up, we can sign the papers tomorrow in Tombstone. But, remember, we're danged anxious to keep the honest cattlemen here."

Jess lay awake a long time thinking over Rafflock's surprising offer, wondering what had prompted it. The fire died down

to a bed of coals. Jess could see the glow of a cigarette as Hunter's guard smoked to keep awake. Hunter himself snored unconcernedly.

At length Jess rolled up in blankets and closed his eyes. No use looking a gift horse in the mouth, he thought and went to sleep.

He was roused by a gun poking him savagely in the ribs.

III

JESS SAT UP WITH A JERK, feeling for his gunbelt. It was gone. The moon had risen dappling the earth beneath the cottonwoods. He heard a faint gasp. Then the gun was jabbed into his ribs again.

"You!" a startled voice hissed. "I thought——. One would think you dead, senor."

Jess' spine tingled as if some one had poured cold water down it. That voice!

"*Quien es?*" he demanded hoarsely.

He was answered by a low laugh and then he knew. It was a girl!

"Silence," she whispered, "unless you want your backbone be carved."

Jess didn't desire it. The girl's hands patted him lightly in search of a holdout gun. Beyond the cottonwoods a horse blew in sudden fright. Jess could see shadows moving, hear the rustle of feet. The cottonwoods were full of men, he sensed.

"Don't move!" the girl whispered in his ear. "You are surrounded." She crossed noiselessly in front of him, passing through a shaft of moonlight. Jess sucked in his breath.

Senorita Scorpion!

The girl was clad in tight doeskin chivarras and a light blouse. She was tall and lithe and walked with the catlike step of an Indian. The green hood looked black in the moonlight.

Somebody gave a startled yell from across the dead fire. There was a thud and the yell broke off in the middle.

El Escorpion paused in mid-stride.

As if the yell had been a signal the cottonwoods erupted into life. Brush snapped. Voices barked at them, ordering them not to move, that they were covered.

Jess took advantage of the confusion to roll behind a trunk. The girl had his gun. He rooted his nose in the sandy soil, divided between curiosity and apprehension, dreading the first nervous trigger finger that would signal a raking fusillade of shots.

"Senor Hunter," called Senorita Scorpion softly. "Are you free?"

From out of the darkness old Tom grunted, "Yes, gal."

The girl's voice rose. "Do not try to follow, Senor Rafflock. You and your men have been disarmed."

Rafflock cursed.

She laughed, a silvery peal that floated back to them in the still night air like a bell. There was the sudden thud of hooves, dwindling into silence.

"Gawd a'mighty!" a stricken voice swore. "They got our horses!"

A match flared. In a moment the fire was blazing, the men crowding about it sheepishly. They had been deftly relieved of their guns while they slept. Not a shot had been fired. Senorita Scorpion or one of her men had crept up on the guard like a wolf and laid him out cold with a rifle barrel.

Jess rolled a cigarette listening to their talk.

"Who'd ever thought that Scorpion gal would've come back fer old Tom? Reckon he was part of the outfit, all right."

Rafflock raised his voice. "Time we got started for Antelope Springs. That's the closest we can get horses."

"That's seven miles!" Pink Ferguson wailed. He'd edged around the fire beside Jess. "What're we supposed to do, walk?"

"Nobody's going to carry you," Jess told him.

"Yeh. Well, what're *you* grinning about?"

"Nothing," Jess said. "I was thinking I'd like to meet Senorita Scorpion."

"You just did," said Pink dryly.

THEY ARRIVED in Tombstone at second drink time and left their borrowed horses at Dunbar's Corral on Frenont Street, a wide dusty thoroughfare of red desert sand lined with one- and two-story shacks.

"We'll get the sheriff started on Senorita Scorpion's trail," Rafflock told Jess, "and then we'll step around to the bank.

Get that loan fixed up." He turned to the others. "Come on, boys. The first drink's on me."

At the Alhambra, Jess got Pink aside.

"I'm going over to the sheriff's office with Rafflock," he told his foreman. "Drift along Allen Street, Pink. See what information you can pick up. Everybody's going to be talking soon as the news gets out that Cabrera's dead. And don't get liquored up."

Pink Ferguson pulled a long face. "Liquored up on three bucks?"

"Don't look so danged sanctimonious. You can cadge more than a bar rag. Meet me at Spangenberg's Gun Shop in two hours. Sober."

At the sheriff's office, Behan promised to send out a posse but he didn't hold out much hope of catching El Escorpion and Hunter.

"The way I figger it," he said with his feet on his desk, "Senorita Scorpion ain't going to amount to much with Cabrera dead."

Rafflock growled like a baited bear, turned on his heel. "Come on, Morgan. We ain't gonna get no action here."

Behan jumped up. "Now don't go getting on the warpath, Ernie. I'll send out the posse. I just say the Scorpion's lit out fer the border and she won't stop running this side of Mexico City."

Rafflock grunted, made for the street. When he and Jess were out of earshot, he began to curse.

"He'll send out a posse!" His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "They'll ride to Antelope Spring and liquor up. Then they'll ride back saying they lost the trail." He shook his head. "Well, here's the bank. How much you figger to need?"

"'Bout six thousand. I can ride down to Mexico, buy a herd. You can take a mortgage on the cattle and land . . ." He let his voice trail off.

A buckboard drawn by a span of shaggy range ponies had turned into Allen Street. Meg Hunter was holding the reins in gloved hands and her mother sat beside her.

Jess stepped out into the street, took off his hat, a broad grin on his face. The two women gave no sign that they saw him. The buckboard clattered past, Meg and her mother staring straight ahead.

Unperturbed, Jess swung up in back.

"Don't like to intrude. But if you're looking for your paw, you've come to the wrong place."

Meg's eyes snapped open and she pulled up the ponies. She was wearing an iron gray traveling dress, pinched in at the waist, bustled in the rear with newspaper. Jess could hear it rustle as she twisted to face him.

"What're you driving at, Mr. Morgan?"

"Old Tom escaped."

"What?" cried Mrs. Hunter. Meg's mouth fell open.

"Yes'm. The Scorpion gang jumped us at Cottonwood Hole, took Tom away from us. Makes it look bad for old Tom."

The brief expression of gladness faded from Meg's face. Her clear gray eyes clouded. "I didn't think of that!"

"No. I reckon not."

Color suffused the girl's throat and cheeks. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it was a damn fool play," he told her bluntly. "He should have stood trial. They didn't have nothing on him but killing Jenkins and that was a clear case of self defense."

"But we didn't—didn't . . ."

"No? Then who did send word to Senorita Scorpion that we was taking old Tom to jail?" Jess swung down, stood with one hand on the wheel. "The best thing for Tom to do is come in and give himself up."

"Now?" Mrs. Hunter's gaunt face set in angry lines. "After that hussy's pried him loose!"

Jess grinned suddenly. "He didn't break no law getting away from us."

Meg looked surprised, then her glance fell on Rafflock watching them from the sidewalk in front of the bank. Her eyes darkened.

"Go on back to Rafflock," she said furiously, "and tell him it didn't work!"

She slapped the half-broken broncs with the reins. Startled, the animals lunged ahead, leaving Jess standing in the middle of the street.

AS JESS LEFT the bank after completing his business with Rafflock, he saw the posse clatter out of town at a high lope. Dodge had been deputized, and Bud Polk. He recognized Porfy Bartlet,

the ex-army scout, and Buckskin Frank Leslie, one of the deadliest killers and shrewdest trackers in Arizona.

That posse meant business.

Pink Ferguson was loitering in front of Spangenberg's Gun Shop when Jess turned the corner. "C'mon. We'd better get heeled."

"You got money?" Pink demanded incredulously.

Jess slapped his middle where the six thousand dollars reposed in his money belt. "It's payday on the old 10X."

Pink let out a whoop of joy and crowded into the gunshop on Jess' heels. The red haired foreman picked out a pearl-handled, nickled colt with a ten-inch barrel.

"Gimme my money. I'm a curly wolf and this is my night to howl."

Jess counted out the greenbacks. "You stay sober. I don't want to bail you out of the calaboose in the morning." He selected a walnut-pommeled 44.40, hesitated over a ten-gauge shotgun, finally bought it.

"Loaded for bear, ain't you?" Pink observed.

"I don't aim to get separated from this money belt. Did you pick up anything in town?"

"Not much. Senorita Scorpion met Cabrera in one of them Mexican dance halls. He used to ride in after dark to see her. Then, one night, she jest up an' disappeared. She's been seen once or twice with Cabrera since then. That's the tally."

Jess was silent until they reached the street. "I still think it's damned queer Senorita Scorpion came back for old Tom. What call'd she have to rescue Hunter? Now, if it'd been Cabrera, I could understand her risking her neck. But old Tom . . ." He shook his head.

"Maybe it appealed to her sporting blood," Pink suggested.

Jess gave the red-haired puncher a disgusted look. "What you know about women," he said dryly, "you could put in a peanut shell and then it would rattle around like a pebble in Grand Canyon."

ALTHOUGH JESS didn't leave Tombstone until the next afternoon, he was able to unearth nothing more about Senorita Scorpion. There were plenty of stories, most of them obvious lies.

But why the girl in the green silk hood should have turned back to rescue Hunter remained an enigma.

It was dusk as Jess and Pink left the last foothills of the Dragoons behind and struck across the sandy wastes of Sulphur Spring Valley. Jess had timed it that way in order to cross the desert after night-fall.

The blood-red sunset faded to lavender, to gray. They were following the freighter's road, Jess a little in advance with the shotgun hanging by a thong from his saddle horn.

"First thing tomorrow," he told Pink, "take the boys down to Wolf Spring Canyon and round up them cows that Cabrera drove off. Push 'em back up on our range."

He broke off talking as his horse picked up his ears, whinnied. "By George," he said, lunging for the shotgun.

A rifle exploded in a clump of mesquite not twenty yards off the road! In the dusk Jess could see the orange spurt of flame lance towards him. Only the fact that he was leaning over for the shotgun saved him.

Then his startled horse began to buck. His fingers missed the stock.

He heard Pink open up and the rifle speak twice more. Suddenly his pitching horse missed its footing in a gully and crashed down. He managed to kick his feet free of the stirrups before he struck. Then his head cracked against a stone . . .

Jess was dimly conscious of somebody stooping over him, tearing at his shirt. As if in a dream he heard shots and yells and then the tattoo of hooves diminishing into silence.

"Jess! Jess!" Pink was shaking him by the shoulder. "Wake up."

The night suddenly snapped into focus. It was completely dark and chill. He shivered as he recalled the drygulcher concealed in the mesquite.

"Did he get away?"

"Yeah," Pink growled furiously, "with your money belt!"

Jess slapped his stomach with both hands. The belt was gone! He remembered being dimly aware of somebody stooping over him.

"Why the hell didn't you stop him?"

"Your cayuse bucked you right into his

arms." Pink sounded offended. "When I located him, he already had your belt and was fixing to put a bullet through your brain—if any. I shot. Missed, I reckon, because he jumped his horse and went helling out of here."

"What'd he look like?"

"It was dark. I didn't get no good look at him."

Jess began to swear furiously.

Pink said, "Reckon we'd better get back to Tombstone and notify the sheriff. I'll catch your horse."

"No!" said Jess suddenly. "Hell, no. Keep this under your hat. I don't want it to get back to Rafflock that I lost that six thousand dollars."

Pink was silent. Finally he asked, "What're you aiming to do?"

"Get it back!" Jess said savagely. "There wasn't but damn few people knew I was carrying that money!"



IV

THE 10X RANCH BUILDINGS, A loose collection of log and adobe structures, sprawled along the north side of Star Canyon about a half mile above its mouth. Jess Morgan and Pink galloped up on lathered horses, flung themselves from the saddle.

They were greeted by silence.

By silence and rising threads of smoke from the blackened embers of the ranch-house, the barns and outbuildings.

Jess felt numb with disbelief. He had ridden off the other morning with the picture of his ranch in its wild and lovely setting filling his eye. Cookee had been scouring kettles behind the kitchen. Mormon Charlie topping off a bronc . . .

Now this!

Pink began to curse in a monotone. But Jess was silent, his expression unnaturally calm. Only a faint paling of his skin, the glitter in his blue eyes betrayed the seething inner fury working in his veins.

"Who done this? Who done it?" Pink suddenly shouted.

Jess shook his head. It was incredible, monstrous. It was like the work of Indians. But the marks of steel shod hooves and high-heeled boots left no doubt that it had been done by white men.

The smell of smoke clung to everything. Jess began to poke around in the hot ashes, caught sight of the charred remains of a body where the kitchen had been.

"Pink. Come here."

"That's Cookee," Pink said looking as if he were going to be sick. "That horse-shoe-nail ring. I'd know it anywhere."

They found the scorched body of Mormon Charlie behind the bunkhouse, where it looked as if he'd made a break for the rocky slope towering above them. He'd been literally riddled. Jess counted nine wounds.

"Hey," a weak voice hailed them from the rocks overhead. "Hey, you fellers. come pack me down. I got a bullet hole in my leg."

"Billy!" said Jess and began to scramble up the slope with Pink on his heels.

They found Billy Rupp lying behind a nest of boulders, white faced, the freckles standing out like pennies. He had managed a tourniquet on his right thigh with his neckerchief. A Henry rifle was propped against the rock beside him.

It took considerable manoeuvring, but they got him down the mountain side, laid him out in the shade of a cottonwood.

"How'd it happen?" Jess demanded in a toneless voice.

Billy shook his head. He was just twenty, a skinny youth who looked as if he were put together out of rawhide. He was barefooted and hatless.

"First we knowed," he said, "the bunkhouse was blazin' around our ears. We run out and they began to pour lead into us."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"It was dark."

"Where're the other boys?"

"They rode into Wilcox." Billy looked embarrassed. "They said they wasn't coming back."

Jess' eyes narrowed. "When'd they drift? Before or after the fight?"

"Before. Yesterday morning."

"How come you and Mormon Charlie and Cooke stayed?"

"Hell, Jess, we rode all the way from Texas with you. We wasn't worried 'bout our money."

Morgan's face softened. He said, "Pink, hitch up the buckboard. Take Billy into Wilcox to the doctor. And wire the sheriff. Better send word to Rafflock, too."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to see if I can't pick up their trail."

"Damn it, Jess, you can't tackle that gang alone!"

"I don't aim to. You get back here with help. I'll leave plenty of sign wherever I go."

Pink took a look at Jess' face, saw that it was useless to remonstrate further. He mounted, rode off for the big pasture to bring up horses.

Fortunately, the buckboard, parked under a tree, had escaped the fire. They fixed Billy Rupp in the bed as gently as possible. Pink mounted to the seat.

"Take care, Jess," he said. "I'll leave Billy with the doctor and ride straight back."

Jess watched the buckboard rattle down the canyon, dust dripping from the iron tires. Pink turned once and threw up his hand, then they were out of sight around a clump of live oak. He could hear the wheels on stone where the trail crossed the creek bed. Then that was gone too. The silence was complete.

Jess walked about inspecting the damage. One wing of the ranchhouse that had been built of adobe and a stone storeroom

were all he had that remained standing.

"Why?" he kept asking himself, "why? Who would want to do a thing like this?"

But he could find no answer.

At length he caught up his horse, rode down to the big pasture where he roped a blaze-faced roan with plenty of bottom and changed saddles. He turned the livery stable horse loose, started a wide circle of the grounds.

It didn't take him long to pick up the trail. The raiders had made no effort to conceal it at this point. It led straight up Star Canyon into the mountains.

For the next two miles there was no place that the raiders could have turned out. Jess started off at a high lope. He hadn't gone a hundred yards when his eyes lit on a streamer of green silk caught on a limb.

The snag on which it hung fluttering was about head high, just right to slash across a rider's face as he rode beneath it. He lifted it down, held it to his nose.

It still smelled faintly of perfume.

Jess wondered if he could bring himself to shoot a woman. But when he thought of Mormon Charlie and Cooke he guessed maybe he could.

TWO MILES above the 10X ranch buildings, three canyons came together to form an irregular star. Here in the loose rock, Jess lost Senorita Scorpion's trail.

Although he searched for it the better part of the afternoon, he couldn't pick it up again. After a while, he gave up and sat his horse in the shade of a rust-red wall of rock, smoking, his blue eyes in-drawn.

Senorita Scorpion had rescued Tom Hunter, who must still be with her. Sooner or later old Tom would try to get in touch with his wife and daughter. Might even be at the Rafter H now, though it wasn't likely. Anyway, Wolf Spring Canyon was the likeliest place to pick up the Scorpion's trail again.

Jess turned his horse back towards the valley.

That night he slept in the open. By ten o'clock the next morning he was ensconced behind a boulder a hundred yards up the side of Wolf Spring Canyon. Directly beneath him lay old Tom's cabin,

his barn and corrals spread along the creek like a map.

Jess waited with the patience of a cat at a mouse hole.

Presently he saw Mrs. Hunter appear from the open areaway between the two halves of the cabin. The woman stood in the yard staring anxiously up the creek. All at once she stiffened, leaned forward.

It had been the cowponies, he realized, who'd told her someone was coming. Their ears were pricked forward and they'd wheeled around facing up the canyon.

One of the horses whinnied. It was answered by another horse still out of sight beyond the barn.

In a moment the rider moved into Jess' view. It was Meg mounted on a jug-headed paint. She was wearing scarred black leather chaps like a man, levis and half-boots with big Mexican spurs. Jess could see them glitter in the sun.

She slid from the paint in front of her mother, and the two women stood there a moment, talking. Jess was too far away to hear what they said. But Mrs. Hunter appeared excited.

Meg shrugged, led the wiry paint to the corral where she unsaddled him and turned him in with the other cowponies. Then she disappeared into the barn.

Jess shifted position. Where had the girl been? To meet her father? Was the Scorpion gang holed up back in the mountains somewhere?

A thin string of smoke began to rise from the cabin's chimney. Meg reappeared, minus her chaps, and entered a small roofless enclosure beside the barn.

From his perch, Jess had an unobstructed view down into the enclosure. A big tub of water had been rigged overhead on the barn roof, he saw. His eyes suddenly widened.

Meg was shucking off her dusty range clothes!

Then she gripped the rope that dangled from the overhead tub, gave it a tug. The tub tilted in its cradle, spilled lukewarm water down over her like a shower.

Like David catching a glimpse of Bathsheba bathing on the roofs of Jerusalem, Jess was hooked!

How had it happened, he wondered in surprise, that he'd never really noticed

Meg before? It occurred to him suddenly that there was no reason why he shouldn't get married once this trouble in the valley was over. And plenty of good reasons in favor of such a move.

The distant bawl of cattle brought him back with a disagreeable start to reality and remembrance that this girl was in the opposite camp. She was Tom Hunter's daughter and old Tom was siding Senorita Scorpion's gang . . .

Then the whole matter was thrust out of his mind. The cattle, by the sound of them, must be headed up Wolf Spring Canyon straight for the cabin below. He could hear the yelling of the cowboys, see the dust foam up through the leaves of the trees.

Meg had heard it too. She dressed with furious haste, ran out of the enclosure.

"Ma!" she called, her voice rising clear as a bell to Jess perched like a hawk in the rocks. "Ma!"

Mrs. Hunter appeared in the yard totting a shotgun. She and her daughter faced down the canyon towards the rising pound of hooves.

Jess saw the head of the herd burst from the trees, the point riders jogging along at a trot. The snaky river of red hair and tossing horns flowed past beneath him, swinging around the barns and corrals.

Dust boiled up from beneath their hooves, and the swing riders had their neckerchiefs over their noses, their hat brims down over their eyes. The herd continued to flow out from beneath the trees as if it had no end. It swept past the two surprised women and on up the canyon.

The CCC brand on the cattle's ribs left no doubt about who was throwing this herd onto Hunter's range. Then the drag came into sight and disappeared again up the canyon. About three hundred head in the drive, Jess estimated.

Rafflock was losing no time preempting the Rafter H water now that old Tom was on the dodge. And then a doubt struck him. Maybe Rafflock knew about these cattle—and maybe he didn't!

The dust was beginning to settle. He could see Meg and her mother talking to each other with excited gestures when a rider came into sight from around the barn.

The women stopped talking and stared. It was one of the men who'd been with the herd. He was dusty and his neckerchief was still pulled over the bridge of his nose. He rode slowly across the yard and dismounted.

Up in his perch, Jess stiffened.

It was Dodge! The gunman had ridden back alone. Jess could see Meg recoil a step and Mrs. Hunter swing up the shotgun.

Alarm squeezed suddenly at his stomach. Why had Dodge returned alone?

With infinite caution, Jess began to work his way down the slope crab-wise, taking advantage of every bush and stone until he got the cabin between himself and the group on the flats. He could hear the crash of brush, the bawling of cattle growing fainter up canyon. And then Meg's voice, shrill with anger, "Let go of me!"

The shotgun boomed!

Jess forgot caution, plunged down the precipitous slope like a goat.

V

WITH THE ECHOES OF THAT shot still ringing in his ears, Jess brought up hard against the rear wall of the cabin. He caromed off the mud-chinked logs, drawing his gun, ducked into the dogtrot. From the broad roofed areaway, open at front and back, he could see straight through to the yard.

Meg was sitting on the ground as if she'd been hurled there, Dodge and Mrs. Hunter struggling over the shotgun. Jess was just in time to see the gunman wrest it away.

Dodge caught sight of Jess in the dogtrot at the same time. Instantly he swung the muzzle around, turned loose with the second barrel.

Jess sprang sideways through the door of the cabin on his left. The charge of buckshot raked the logs, ripping out long splinters of wood. There was no time to waste. He stepped back into the areaway, six-gun raised.

Dodge, he saw, had dropped the empty shotgun and snatched his bone-handled Colts. The gunman was in the very act of thumbing the hammer.

Jess fired.

Their shots rang out almost together.

Dodge was doubled over and flung backwards as the .44 slug caught him in the belly. He fired again, but the bullet went wild, knocking a splinter of stone from the chimney.

Jess was still shooting. His second bullet broke the gunman's right arm six inches above the wrist. His third struck Dodge's hip and knocked him down.

"Damn you, damn you," Dodge swore, struggling to raise the Colt in his left hand, "Just let me take you along."

Jess shot him in the mouth.

He kept pulling the trigger until a dry "click" informed him that his gun was empty.

LESS than fifteen seconds had elapsed since the first exchange of shots. Jess sank down on the bench inside the dogtrot, began to reload his Colt. His fingers shook so that he could scarcely plug in the shells.

He heard Mrs. Hunter say, "Go get a blanket to put over him. The flies'll get at him there."

Meg appeared in the dogtrot, walked unsteadily into the other half of the cabin. Her face was bloodless, blue eyes glazed.

Jess stood up, found that his legs had lost their rubbery feel, and stepped into the yard.

"You hit?" Mrs. Hunter demanded.

"I don't think so."

"No," she said, peering at him sharply.

"You can rest your mind. Though it's a miracle you ain't."

Jess jerked his chin at the dead gunman. "What did he want?"

"He said he come to move us out. Said Rafflock was going to use this cabin for a line shack. Meg flared up and ordered him off. He knocked her sprawling. I took a shot at him, but he was too quick for me. He knocked my gun in the air and wrestled it away."

Meg returned, carrying a blue homespun coverlet.

"Wait a minute," said Jess. He stooped over Dodge, ripped open the shirt exposing a leather money belt, which he unbuckled and yanked off. "All right, cover him up."

Meg's eyes were enormous as she spread the coverlet over the gunman.

Jess had opened the belt and was counting bills. His six thousand was there intact, also three thousand, seven hundred dollars of Dodge's money. He caught Meg staring at him open-mouthed and grinned at her.

"The rewards of virtue," he said and buckled the belt about his waist.

He turned to Mrs. Hunter. "There was six men with Dodge moving them cows. They'll have heard the shots——"

He broke off, reached for his Colt, backing into the dogtrot. Meg gasped.

Two men on horseback were coming up the creek at a dead run.

"Never mind them," Mrs. Hunter said with relief. "That's Tobe and Curly, Big Ben Ash's boys. They been givin' us a hand on the ranch."

"They stand by you in a fight?"

Meg said, "They'll stick."

"Good."

The two riders galloped up, flung themselves from their lathered ponies. Jess noticed with satisfaction that they both had rifles in saddle scabbards.

"What in Samhill's come off here?" the eldest brother demanded. He was wearing a vest over a blue flannel shirt, fawn colored pants, fancy stitched half-boots with big silver spurs. "Me'n Curly seen a herd turn up the canyon. Before we could get here it sounded like the battle of Bull Run was being fit."

Curly had jerked down the coverlet. "Dodge! Jee-rusalem!"

Jess said, "No time to explain now. Curly, get up in them rocks over the cabin with your rifle. You go to the barn, Tobe. Mrs. Hunter can take one side of the cabin with her shotgun and Meg the other."

"What th——"

"Go on!" said Jess. "We're past due for company."

The two brothers yanked their rifles from the scabbards, started in opposite directions.

"Run, damn you!" Jess yelled. "I think I can hear them."

They broke into awkward lopes, Curly scrambling up the steep side of the canyon, Tobe disappearing into the barn.

"Get those horses behind the house," Jess told Meg.

In seconds he was alone in the yard.

Then the clang of a metal-shod hoof rang sharply in the silence.

"Come on out!" Jess yelled. "But keep your hands away from your guns."

The silence dragged itself out. Jess, standing in the open, could feel his flesh crawl. Finally a voice called from behind the barn,

"I'm coming. Don't shoot."

"Come ahead."

Bud Polk rode around the barn at a walk. The other CCC hands trailed him uneasily.

"There's Dodge," Jess said, pointing at the blanket covered figure. "Tie him on his horse an' take him along with you. You got one hour to get them CCC cattle back into the valley. Now get a move on."

Bud Polk's eyes widened in dismay, and the blood flushed up into his Indian-like cheekbones.

"Since when did you start giving orders, Morgan?"

Jess smiled bleakly. He didn't answer Polk, but lifted his voice.

"Tobe!"

"Yeh," Tobe answered from the barn.

"Curly!"

From the rocks overhead Curly shook his rifle in the air. The twin barrels of Mrs. Hunter's shotgun slid across the sill of the cabin.

"You boys figgerin' to make a fight of it?" Jess asked dryly.

Bud Polk's skin yellowed. His eyes shifted to the rocks, to the barn. But mostly they clung to the ugly snout of the shotgun peeping over the window sill.

"That beats me."

"Hit the trail then," Jess said in a bleak voice. "Go on. Hit it!"

JESS MORGAN accepted Mrs. Hunter's laconic invitation to eat with alacrity. After the meal he said he'd better go look after his horse. He had hidden the roan in a clump of cottonwoods about a mile down the canyon.

To his surprise Meg said she'd go along with him.

She was still wearing the faded levis and high-heeled boots, and the big Mexican spurs jingled as they crossed the baked clay yard. It was the only sound until the cabin was left behind.

Jess said, "Meg."

"Yes, Mister Morgan."

"My friends generally call me Jess."

"Yes, Mister Morgan."

She was looking at him, he realized, with a twinkle in her gray eyes. Her lashes were long and smoky black. She had a firm chin, a short nose with a spattering of freckles across it. Her lips were full, parted a little in a half smile so that he could see the luster of her small white teeth like the inside of a shell. Altogether it set his pulse to jumping.

He pushed his hat to the back of his head, grinned. "All right, Miss. But what do you folks aim to do?"

"Who's side are you on?"

"My own."

"You're not sidin' Rafflock anymore?"

"Does it look like it?"

She gave him a perplexed glance. "That's no answer. There was bad blood between you and Dodge. You might've made that an excuse to rid yourself of him. You're cold-blooded enough to've done it."

"Don't try to flatter me," he said dryly.

"I'll string along with Rafflock so long as he's trying to get shut of the rustlers. But I don't hold with this sort of——"

"He's the biggest thief of them all!" she burst out passionately.

"Can you prove that?"

She stopped and faced him. It was sweltering in the canyon, and he could see a film of moisture on her earnest face.

"Jess, can't you see he's pulling the wool over your eyes? Rafflock's set himself up to be king of the valley, and he doesn't care how he does it. Why do you think he's paying fighting wages, hiring killers and outlaws?"

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

The girl bit her lip. "Yes. I had to find out whose side you were on."

"I told you. My own."

"You can't be. You're either for Rafflock or against him." She stamped her foot. "Oh! Why did I bother to come out here!"

"And all the time," Jess said with a serious face, "I been thinking it was my fatal beauty."

Meg began to get red.

"Men!" she burst out in a tone of loath-

ing. "Ugh! A girl's a fool to get married!"

"You sound like you got something agin 'em."

"And why shouldn't I have? Look at Ma. She was beautiful—truly beautiful. And now look at her, worn out, old at thirty-nine. Work, nothing but hard work. That's what marriage is. That and bearing children."

Jess felt vaguely shocked. In his experience, nice girls didn't talk so freely.

"I know what you're thinking," she flung at him. "And it isn't fair. Why should the fancy women, girls like *Senorita Scorpion*, have all the fun?"

"What would you propose?"

She glanced at him slantwise from beneath her lashes, and her eyes began to dance again. "Not what you're thinking!"

Jess said, "You little devil," and grabbed her. To his surprise, he felt Meg relax. She lifted her face—and bit him. Bit him hard.

Jess couldn't have turned loose any quicker if he'd gotten hold of a mountain lion. Meg giggled. She sank on a rock laughing while he stared down at her disapprovingly.

"Next time," she said, "don't grab me so sudden."

Jess began to grin. "I got off the trail," he said dryly. "I wanted you to take a message to your paw."

"Take a message to Pap?" Meg quit laughing. "But I don't know where he is."

He paid no attention to her protestation. "Tell him to break off with *El Escorpion*."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to hunt her out of the country."

Meg looked startled. "But, Jess, what have you against the *Scorpion*?"

He told her about the ranch, about Mormon Charlie and Cookee. She jumped up, a frightened expression on her face.

"Jess, that—that's terrible. But *Senorita Scorpion* didn't do it. Somebody's trying to frame her. I—I know she couldn't have done it."

He gave her a strange hard stare. "What makes you so sure?"

"I—I——" she looked at him pleadingly. "Can't you take my word for it?"

"Sure. When you give me a reason.

Meanwhile, you tell your paw to get away from her and stay away."

Meg was silent until they reached his horse. She sprang up behind him, slipped her arms around his waist. They were almost back to the ranch before she spoke.

"Jess."

"Yeh?"

"Look at me, Jess."

He turned his head. It was a day of surprises. Meg kissed him quickly, fiercely, and slid off the horse before he could guess her intention.

Astonishment struggled with pleasure on Jess' wind-roughened face.

"All the more reason for you to get word to your paw," he drawled. "Because I aim to smoke out *Senorita Scorpion* sure as you're born."

"But, Jess," she cried indignantly, "I don't know where he is!"

"Then you better find him before I do." And tipping his hat, he wheeled the roan, rode down the canyon at a canter.

VI

ONCE OUT IN THE VALLEY Jess headed south, away from the 10X. A quarter mile beyond Wolf Spring Canyon he turned into the mountains again putting the road to a steep slope. They went up it, slipping, lunging, striking sparks from the loose rock.

A narrow bench lay above, from which a trail zig-zagged back in to the *Chiracahuas* roughly parallel to Wolf Spring Canyon. Jess broke twigs as he rode along it. Twice at forks in the trail, he dismounted, built a small cairn of pebbles to show which way he'd taken.

In less than an hour, he had circled the Rafter H and had reached a point half a mile above Hunter's cabin overlooking the canyon. There he squatted on his heels, smoking one cigarette after another.

It wasn't long before his patience was rewarded. Meg appeared on the trail below, pushing the paint horse at a smart clip. She passed beneath him, disappeared around a bend in the canyon.

Jess gave her plenty of time to get out of earshot before he mounted, spurred the roan over the edge.

The horse went down the side of the canyon on his haunches, a small avalanche

of stones rattling along with him. At the bottom Jess turned into the girl's trail. There was a faint smile on his face.

Presently Meg's tracks climbed out of the canyon to a high, thickly wooded bench with the rim rock towering above the pines. For a dozen yards, her trail led through the timber. Then it played out entirely.

Jess pulled up his mount with a frown. Suddenly he lifted his head, sniffed.

The faint acrid tang of woodsmoke filled his nostrils. A campfire. He must be right on top of Senorita Scorpion's hideout!

Jess tethered the roan in a stand of young pine, lifted the shotgun from the saddle horn. His feet were noiseless on the slick carpet of needles as he advanced warily toward the rim rock.

Unexpectedly the belt of timber came to an end. Jess peered out cautiously at the talus base of the cliff, along which lay a series of shallow wind-hollowed caves, looking as if they'd been scooped out of the soft red rim rock with a spoon.

A fire was burning in one of the caverns. Two men sprawled beside it, playing cards. Jess recognized the cadaverous features of old Tom. The other was a lean slim-hipped young fellow whom he remembered vaguely as one of the numerous Ash boys.

He could discover no sign of Meg nor the paint horse. Only the two men playing cards. Where was Senorita Scorpion and the rest of the gang?

He waited. The minutes dragged past and still no one else put in an appearance.

Jess stood up slowly, raised the shotgun. "Lift 'em, boys! Easy!"

The young fellow turned his head, grinned. Old Tom spat in the fire, called, "Gawd a'mighty, what's been keeping you, Morgan?"

A shiver of uncertainty rippled through Jess. "Go on," he said in a gray voice. "Reach!"

"Put that thing somewheres else," old Tom retorted. "You think we don't keep a lookout. Hell fire, Walt seen you coming two hours ago. Ain't that right, Walt?"

Walt Ash nodded. "Why, Morgan, you're covered right this minute."

"That's an old trick," Jess said.

From behind him a girl's voice replied softly, "But a good one, *Senor!*"

A GUN prodded him in the small of the back. He paled, jerked involuntarily. The voice at his ear said, "Be so kind as to lay down your weapons."

The sweat began to roll down Jess' face.

"I bluff easy," he said and laid the shotgun at his feet, unbuckled his cartridge belt, let the holstered Colt drop.

"*Bueno!*" the girl said. "To the cave."

Jess picked his way up the talus.

"Seat yourself," she commanded in Spanish.

He squatted by the fire. Old Tom lashed his ankles and wrists with a piggin string. Jess' eyes, though, were on Senorita Scorpion as she nimbly ascended the talus.

The tight chivarras of softest black doe-skin fit her like a heavy tan. He caught the glitter of her eyes behind the slits in the green hood. An ugly Colt was trained at his belly. It looked like a cannon in the girl's small gloved fist.

"You are a fool, *Senor,*" she said in Spanish. "Why did you intrude yourself here? We had no quarrel with you. Now——" She shrugged her shoulders delicately, an ominous note in her voice.

"Then why did you burn the 10X?" he demanded.

"That silly story you told *Senor Hunter's* daughter! We are not interested in burning houses. There is no profit in it!"

"Then who did?"

"*Quien sabe?* But it was not us."

Cowpen Spanish was a second tongue to Jess, but there was something about the girl's words that puzzled him, and he stared at her hard.

As if to compensate for having to hide her scarred face, she was plenty free with the rest of her person. Jess frowned. He could make out no sign of a bandage through her thin white blouse though he could see near everything else.

A tide of red washed up the girl's throat to the edge of the green silk hood. That blank hood, relieved only by eye-slits, lent her the inhuman look of a cat. She was tall and slender with something cat-like about her movements too. Nor

did the tight black leggins detract from the illusion.

"Enough!" she said angrily and dropped to her knees beside Jess. With light deft fingers she unbuttoned his shirt, unbuckled the money belt.

"That's the dangdest thing to hang onto," Jess remarked wryly.

Old Tom's eyes quickened, and he licked his lips. Walt Ash said, "Them's the kind of profits we're interested in. Hand it over, *muchacha.*" He held out his hand.

She said, "I will hand it to Don Ben and to no one else!"

"Don Ben!" Walt gave a short laugh. "Pap'll like that. Hand it here. I'll give it to him."

Senorita Scorpion's only answer was to pull up her blouse, buckle the belt next her skin.

"No you don't!" Walt lunged to his feet. "I'll be danged if you get away with that——"

Old Tom covered him quickly with the shotgun. "Leave her be, Walt. Wait till Ben gets here."

Walt's eyes were flat and ugly, but he squatted on his heels sullenly.

JESS had been listening with a glitter in his blue eyes. "I thought you was wounded?" He turned abruptly on the girl. If she was startled, the blank face of the hood hid it.

"It was only a scratch."

"How'd you come to tie up with this outfit?"

She ignored the question. It was old Tom who finally answered for her.

"My Meg found her. She was ridin' over to fetch the Ash boys when she run plumb into Senorita Scorpion lying unconscious in the trail."

"When was that?"

"Whilst our boys were taking me to Tombstone. El Escorpion wasn't bad hurt. The bullet had only burnt her ribs. But, what with being skeered half out of her wits an' thinking she was worse wounded than she was, she had keeled out of the saddle an' hit her head. My Meg carried her on to Ben Ash's place."

"It was Big Ben Ash and his boys that pried you loose from Rafflock, then?" Jess asked.

"Yes, sir," Hunter said. "And when

the Scorpion heard what was up, she was rarin' to come along."

"You talk too much!" Walt growled.

Jess said, "Say, where's Meg now?"

"She rode down to fetch Tobe and Curly."

"She didn't pass me coming up."

"Hell, son, there's more ways out of this place than a rabbit hole. Have a chew." He proffered his plug of tobacco.

Morgan shook his head, leaned his back against a boulder that had scaled from the cliff. Tom Hunter's story sounded straight, but something kept troubling him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

IT was fairly obvious that old Tom, Big Ben Ash and his numerous progeny were rustlers. He heard Senorita Scorpion say something about rest as she moved from sight into another shallow cavern. Down in the pines a squirrel began to bark angrily and then fell silent.

"Now that you got me, Tom," he asked suddenly, "what do you aim to do with me?"

Old Tom's jaw worked a minute in silence. "Morgan, I'm fer turning you loose. But Walt here don't see it thataway."

"You're damn right, I don't," Walt snapped.

"So," Hunter continued imperturbably, "we're waiting to hear what Ben says. Ben ramrods this outfit."

"You talk too much!" Walt said again.

Old Tom grunted, wiped his mouth and chin. "Walt, you put too high a value on words," he told the younger man. "An' yours in particular ain't worth nothing."

Walt's face reddened. Jess chuckled.

"Morgan, don't get us wrong," old Tom resumed. "Listening to Walt there, you'd think we was the James boys. The fact is Rafflock's been pushing us two-bit ranchers pretty hard. We only take back what's ourn—an' maybe a mite more for interest."

"Seems like I've heard that song before," Jess said.

Hunter's eyes twinkled. "Speaking of hearing things, did you ever hear about Fallice down in the Swisshelms? Had him a nice little ranch, good water. Water's worth a powerful lot in a dry

land. You got good water, ain't you?"

Jess said, "Yeh."

"Well," old Tom went on, "Fallice was killed and skelped and his shack burnt. Coroner's jury said 'Paches done it, but I've seen a heap of Indians in my time. If it was 'Paches kilt Fallice, I'm a parson."

"After the dust settled, there was Rafflock holding a mortgage on the Fallice place."

"Mortgage?"

"Shore." Old Tom gave Jess a shrewd look. "Anything bit you, son?"

"No. How'd Rafflock get the mortgage?"

"Wasn't nothing to it. Dodge and Bud Polk ran off all Fallice's cows. But Fallice didn't savvy what was behind the rustling. He and Rafflock was *campaneros*. Rafflock slapped him on the back, loaned him enough money to get a fresh start. Only Fallice didn't get to spend that money. Indians got him first. White Indians!"

Jess winced. "How do you know it wasn't bronco Apaches?"

"The money. 'Paches don't touch it. Not greenbacks. They got no use for it. And Fallice's roll was gone. Rafflock took over the ranch with his mortgage."

Jess said, "Seems I've heard the Yances mentioned too."

Tom shook his head. "Yance commenced to lose stock same as Fallice, but he didn't trust Rafflock. He borrowed from the bank. Then danged if he didn't lock horns with Dodge."

"Yance was slow as molasses, and Dodge put three bullets plumb between his eyes."

"Rafflock bought up Yance's mortgage from the bank whilst he was still laid out in the dry goods store."

Jess regarded him with hard unsmiling blue eyes. "Unhealthy for Rafflock to hold your mortgage, ain't it?"

"Practically fatal."

Tom squinted at the sun. It was like a red hot penny dropping into the slot of the hills. The belt of timber was already blue with shadows.

"Reckon, I'd better start supper——" he began, but he got no farther.

An orange-red gush of flame lanced from the cover of the pines. Jess heard

the *whack* of the slug striking flesh, the flat report of the rifle.

Old Tom was smashed back against the rock, his leathery bewhiskered face frozen in surprise. There were three shots so close together that they were just a blur of sound.

Walt Ash sprang erect, took a step forward. His gun never cleared his holster. He fell forward, began to roll down the talus.

There were more shots—four or five of them. Jess could hear them smash against the cliff. He squirmed frantically behind a boulder.

After that there were no more shots. Jess could see nothing but the gathering shadows, hear nothing but the silence.

VII

COLD WITH SWEAT, JESS LAY there for what seemed like hours before he heard a voice rumble, "Guess that smoked 'em all out."

He went rigid, strained frantically at his bonds, hearing the crunch of footsteps on the talus. Then he recognized Rafflock's bass.

"Hunter dead?"

There was a pause, before he heard Bud Polk reply disgustedly, "Naw. Hole in his laig. Looks like one of the bullets creased him too."

Rafflock grunted. Someone threw wood on the fire. The flames caught hold, began to paint the rocks crimson.

"Only the two of 'em here," a strange voice put in.

Jess wondered suddenly what had become of Senorita Scorpion. The caverns beneath the cliff weren't true caves but a series of overhanging ledges. The rubble beneath them was studded with huge boulders that had dropped from the ceiling. It would be easy to slip away without being seen.

A flaming pitch-laden torch was thrust suddenly into his face. "Hey," Bud Polk cried, "Here's Morgan. Hog tied, by Gawd!"

"Haul him out!"

Polk grabbed Morgan by the shoulders and dragged him a foot or two beyond the boulder where the firelight could shine in his face.

Jess caught sight of Rafflock, glaring down at him like an angry Colossus. A smallish, thin-lipped man stood at his elbow.

"You didn't arrive none too soon," Jess grinned. "Cut me loose, Rafflock."

There was no answering smile on the big man's face. Without a word he stooped over Jess, grabbed his shirt, tore it open.

"Where is it?"

"What're you looking for?"

"The money belt you took off Dodge."

The grin on Jess' face had smoothed into a little crooked smile. He didn't answer.

"Where's that belt?"

"Find it."

Rafflock drew his revolver, trained it at the pit of Jess' stomach.

"What have you done with it, Morgan? I want that nine thousand dollars and by God I intend to get it."

"So you knowed that Dodge lifted the six thousand off me?"

"Morgan, where is it? Speak up or I'll put a bullet through your belly."

Jess' face was bloodless, the sweat standing out like dew. "Go ahead, shoot. You'll never find it!"

Rafflock began to swear in a low flat voice, then he turned angrily on Bud Polk. "It's bound to be here someplace. Look for it. Give him a hand, Montana."

It was black dark beyond the rim of firelight. Polk and the other man took torches, began to hunt among the boulders, their huge shadows grotesque on the cliff's face.

"Hey!" Polk said and tossed a bundle of clothes at Rafflock's feet. "One of 'em must took off in his drawers."

Rafflock kicked the bundle open, revealed a dusty pair of overall pants, a checked flannel shirt and run-down half-boots.

"Who do these belong to?"

Jess shook his head.

Bud Polk and the man called Montana returned to the fire. "No sign of it."

With a grunt, Rafflock grasped the front of Jess' torn shirt, hauled him half erect, hit him in the mouth.

"Where is it?"

Jess could taste the salty taste of blood.

It began to trickle down his chin. He smiled wryly.

"You kill me, Rafflock, and that's nine thousand dollars you'll never lay your hands on."

Rafflock hit him again. Jess' head swam. He felt himself hurled to the ground. Then the giant began to kick him in the side. It was like burying a knife in his kidneys every time the pointed toe struck.

Dimly he could hear Bud Polk yelling, "Give 'im the hooks, boss! Give 'im the hooks!"

Something raked down his cheek like a branding iron. The red haze before his eyes thickened. He felt the boot land again, dully, and then he didn't feel anything.

Jess' first conscious sensation was pain. He bit off a groan, warned to silence by some animal instinct. Dimly he became aware of voices—mumbling. Mumbling. Then his senses cleared. He could hear Rafflock talking.

He was lying on his side, his face to the fire, his arms still tied behind him. Something touched his wrist. He almost jumped out of his bonds.

Biting back a yell, he could feel it working—working at the piggin string about his wrists. He didn't even breathe.

Who was it?

"Senor," a voice breathed. "Your hands are free."

Senorita Scorpion! She'd sneaked back. Must be lying on her stomach behind the boulder, reaching one arm out to work at his bonds.

He tried to move his fingers. They were numb, useless.

"Senor, there is a gun in your hand."

He tried to close his fingers around the butt. He couldn't even feel it.

He heard Rafflock say, "See if Morgan's come around yet."

Jess kept his eyes shut, lay motionless, breathing heavily. He could hear steps approaching.

"He's still out."

"Douse him with water. We ain't got all night."

The steps moved away, returned. A cataract of icy water struck him in the face and chest. It took his breath away. He gasped, choked and coughed.

"Possuming, by God!" Bud Polk burst out.

The icy water had stimulated his circulation, Jess realized. He could feel his fingers prickling painfully as the blood returned. He wriggled them experimentally. They curled about the butt of the revolver.

Rafflock strode up, gun in hand. "I'm tired of fooling with you, Morgan. Where's that belt?"

"You can go to hell," said Jess and jerking up his hand, he shot Rafflock in the belly.

THE boss of the Coronado Land and Cattle Company took a step and bent double, a look of incredulity on his face. He tried to lift his gun. Jess shot him again.

Rafflock went to his knees, still struggling to bring up his gun. Jess' third shot knocked him over on his back.

There was a flash and a deafening explosion in Jess' ear. Montana fell forward across the fire, his gun dropping from nerveless fingers.

"I ain't fighting!" Bud Polk yelled. "I ain't fighting."

Jess scrambled to his feet. Bud Polk began to back away, hands raised.

"Shed your guns."

Polk gingerly unbuckled his belt, let it slide, still retreating backwards step by step.

"Stop!"

Polk halted stiffly. Senorita Scorpion ran out of the shadows to old Tom's side, dropped to her knees. The stink of burning cloth began to sift through the air.

"Drag that man out of the fire," Jess rapped out. "Is he dead?"

Polk took hold of Montana's heels, pulled him clear. He stood up, nodded shakily. "He's dead."

"Who burned the 10X?"

Polk's eyes were shining with fear. His skin looked jaundiced.

"I don't know," he mumbled.

The gun in Jess' hand roared.

Bud Polk was twitched half around. He screamed like a girl, grabbed his upper left arm with his right hand. Blood began to ooze between his fingers.

Senorita Scorpion gasped.

"Who burned the 10X?" Jess repeated.

"Dodge."

"Why?"

"Rafflock told him to. Dodge was to kill you or run you out of the country soon as Rafflock had the mortgage on your place."

"Who run off my cattle?"

"Dodge. He got most of 'em."

"Go on, talk—damn you!"

"I'm talking. We only followed orders. We got a cut, but that was all. Rafflock was stealing the Coronado Cattle Company blind, stocking his place down in the Swisshelms."

"All right," said Jess. "You can fill in the details for the sheriff." He turned to Senorita Scorpion. "Hold the gun on him while I tie him up."

THE FIRE had burned low. Jess threw on a log. The flames lit up the figure of old Tom where he was sleeping a few yards off. Aside from the wound in the fleshy part of his leg and a creased scalp, he was all right.

Bud Polk was rolled up in his blankets, but whether he was asleep or not it was impossible to say.

Jess yawned, stubbed out his cigarette. "Better turn in," he told the girl. "We got a busy day tomorrow, getting 'em down to the Rafter H."

"You—you're not taking Senor Hunter to Tombstone?"

"No. Nor Bud Polk, neither. I figger the sheriff ought to be at the Rafter H by tomorrow. I sent Pink Ferguson after him and left a plain trail in." He grinned ruefully. "That's how Rafflock found me so quick."

"The sheriff!" The Scorpion rose swiftly to her feet. "Jess." She gave his name the English pronunciation. "I—I am going back to *Mejico*—tonight!"

"Not with my money belt, you ain't."

"The belt! I—I'd forgotten."

He could see her throat begin to get red again. She slipped it off, held it out.

Jess took out the bills, counted them deliberately. "Dern my hide," he said, "if this stuff don't grow a little every time I get it back."

There was now almost ten thousand dollars in the belt. The Scorpion was rigid as he buckled it about his waist. He grinned at her. "Why don't you take off that hood?"

He heard her gasp. "I—I'd die of shame."

"You can't hide your face all your life!" His grin broadened. "Not from your husband!"

The girl shrank away from him. "You—me?"

"That's right. You and me." Before she could guess his intention, his long arm had whipped out, yanked the hood from her head.

Meg Hunter's yellow hair spilled down about her shoulders. She stared at Jess out of wide gray eyes, her face hot with embarrassment. Then she hid her head on his shoulder.

"You knew!"

"Yes," he said, "I knew. What happened to the real Senorita Scorpion?"

"She's dead, Jess. I found her on the trail like Pap said, but she was dead. She'd—she'd bled to death, I think." The girl shivered in his arms. "I—I was crazy-mad. I was going to kill Rafflock for what he'd done to us, to Pap and to that girl too."

"I dressed in El Escorpion's clothes and rode with the Ash boys to rescue Pap. That night at Cottonwood Hole when I stuck the gun in your ribs, I thought you were Rafflock. I saw my mistake in the nick of time. And then I didn't get another chance."

She lifted her head. "I—I was so afraid of what you'd think of me if you found out. Jess, did you mean that? What you said about you and me?"

There wasn't but one answer to that and Jess made it—satisfactorily.

A log burned through, sent up a pillar of sparks. Meg pushed against his chest, looked up at him anxiously.

"Jess, that—that money. Two hundred dollars of it are mine. I put it there—"

"Don't give it another thought," he said. "I'll buy you a dress out of it. A green silk dress."