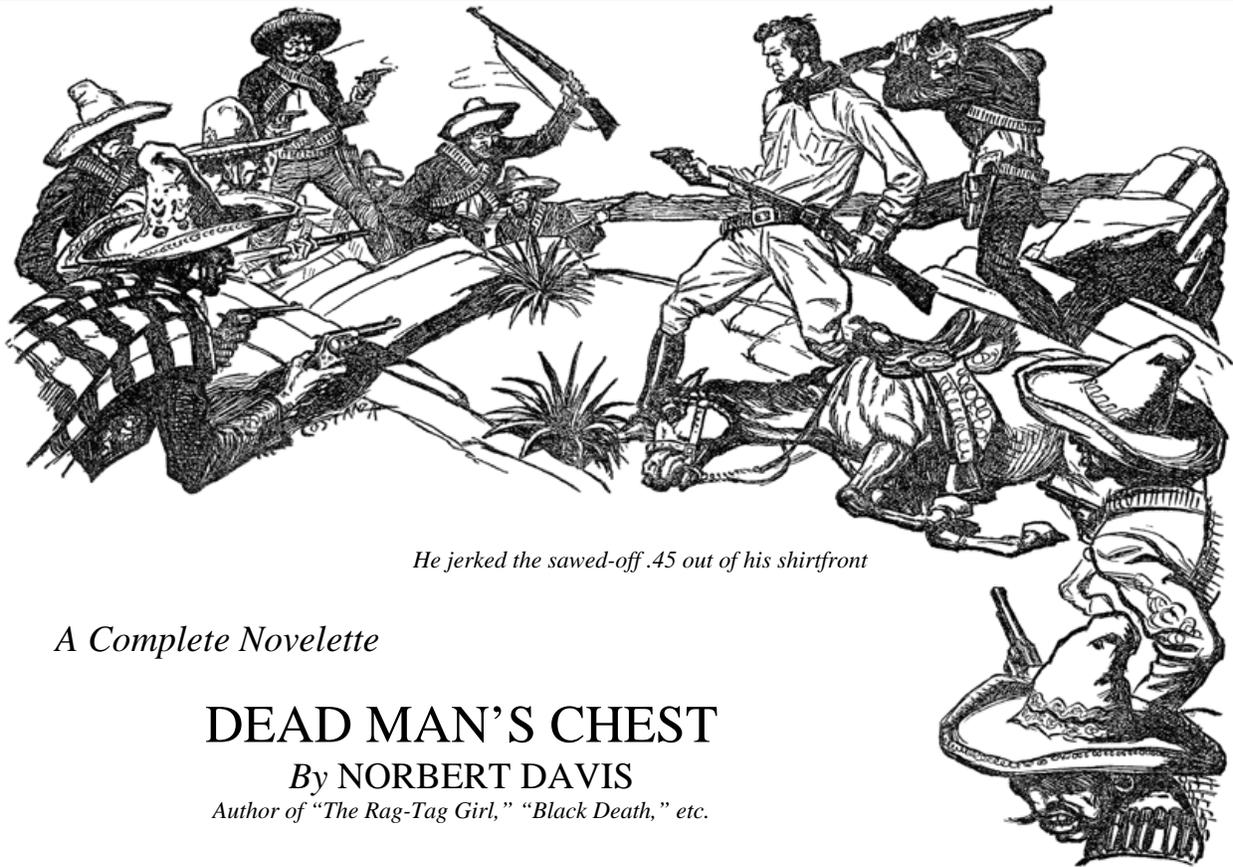


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*Greed-Mad Desperadoes Stage a Death Ambush for Possession of Buried Loot!*

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*He jerked the sawed-off .45 out of his shirtfront*

*A Complete Novelette*

## DEAD MAN'S CHEST

By NORBERT DAVIS

Author of "The Rag-Tag Girl," "Black Death," etc.

### CHAPTER I

#### *Below the Border*

THE *tequila* smelled like rotten eggs and tasted like carbolic acid slightly diluted with ground glass, but "Poco" Kelly drank it down without the slightest change in the expression on his face.

"How much?" he asked.

The greasy *mestizo* behind the bar was an excellent judge of character. He had to be in this place. One mistake, and they buried him. He took a calculating look at Poco Kelly. He saw an immensely tall man with a long, gaunt face and rust-colored hair and huge hands and feet. Poco Kelly looked thin, in fact, skinny, until examined closely, then it was discovered he just wasn't carrying any spare flesh.

His face was a bony caricature that looked as though he had been thoroughly worked over with a war club when he was very young. His nose was bent crookedly, his jaw bone was lumpy. A saber scar stretched from the corner of his mouth straight across his cheek to his ear. The bottom of the ear

was gone.

Poco Kelly looked clumsy and harmless and a little dumb, until you saw his eyes. They were a clear blue, steely, glittering a little. It was like seeing a clumsily wrapped package of dynamite, and then noticing suddenly that it had a lighted fuse on it.

The bartender bowed gracefully. "*Nada*," he said. "Nothing to you, *senor*. It is my pleasure."

"It's your luck, you mean," Poco Kelly said amiably. "I was going to make you eat whatever you charged me for that poison. *Adios, amigo*."

"*Malo hombre*," the bartender muttered as the door slapped shut behind Poco Kelly's wide shoulders.

Poco walked away from the lighted grease-smearred windows of the *cantina* stumbling on the rough cobblestone pavement of the darkly crooked street. He was disgusted. There was nothing to see, nothing to do in this Tepeyac place.

Tepeyac was far south of the border in Old Mexico. A sleepy village hidden among the mountains thrown up around it like a tumbled blanket. Dusty and dirty and full of strange smells.

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*Poco Kelly, Intrepid Adventurer, Straddles Danger Among Mexican Border Bandits!*

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Hotter than fire in the daytime with the sun blazing down. Beautiful maybe, if you liked clashing colors and the picturesque. Poco Kelly didn't.

He was in Tepeyac because, traveling up from the south, he had run out of funds here. He had sold his horse and what personal effects he could spare to the town's one innkeeper and so had a place to eat and sleep for the moment and some small change to jingle in his pocket. He wasn't worried. Something would turn up.

He had almost reached the corner when a small dark figure spun around it running hard and slammed headlong into him. Kelly had just enough warning to have time to brace his legs against the shock. The figure bounced off him as though he had been a cement post, tripped, and fell down against an adobe wall in a huddled heap, panting in gasping sobs.

"Here—" Kelly leaned over.

He had time to say no more. Three other figures pounded around the corner, skidded to a stop when they saw him and the dark figure on the ground. They were only vague outlines in the darkness, thick shadows with an air of menace about them and with rasping breaths coming harshly from their throats.

"Well?" said Poco Kelly, straightening.

They didn't utter a sound. They spread a little apart in a moving semicircle, then suddenly they came for him in a silent rush. A fugitive ray of light caught and glittered on a knife blade.

"Ho!" said Poco Kelly, grimly amused. "So that's it!"

His hands whipped inside his shirt and out again. He held a .45 Colt. It was a queer weapon, with the barrel sawed off until it was no more than two inches long and the butt cut down to a skeleton of its regular size. It kicked like a mule, that gun, and it would break the hand of anyone not used to it.

It roared, slapped out an orange flare of smoky flame. The man in the center of the three went over backward and hit the pavement so hard his head bounced. He made no other movement.

The gun crashed again, and another of the men went whirling away, clawing at the air and screaming in a high, thin voice. The third didn't wait. He turned and ran.

**P**OCO KELLY was suddenly alone in a thick, dead silence. He stared around him. The small

dark figure was no longer crouched against the wall. It was creeping cautiously away in the shadows.

As soon as he took a step toward it, the figure bounced up and ran. But Poco Kelly could move like a streak. He caught the dark figure by the shoulder before it had taken more than ten steps, whirled it around.

"No, you don't!" he said. He could see it a little more clearly now." A boy, with a battered hat crushed down over the pale, frightened oval of his features. He was still panting brokenly, and whimpered in Poco Kelly's grasp, trying to squirm away.

"What's the idea of all this?" Kelly demanded. "What were they chasing you for?"

The boy spoke in a frightened whisper. "*No habla Ingles, senior.*"

Poco Kelly flipped out a big hand and knocked the hat off. Thick coppery hair gleamed in the dimness down over the boy's shoulders.

"Ah!" said Kelly. "I thought so! You make a better looking girl than you do boy!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" the girl said, then, in English. She tried to jerk away, pulling frantically.

"Now wait a minute," said Poco Kelly calmly. "Don't be in such a hurry. I thought you said you couldn't speak English."

She stopped struggling. "Please! Those men that were after me—they'll come back—"

"Two of them won't come back until Gabriel blows his horn," said Poco Kelly, "and if the third kept on traveling like he was when he left here he's probably halfway to China already."

The girl's breath was coming more evenly now. "You—you saved my life. I'm very grateful. But I've got to go—run—"

"Now wait," said Kelly. "A girl can't just go running around in the dark like this. And what's more, I haven't seen anyone that can speak English for two months, and I'm tired of hearing myself speak Spanish."

She stared up at him. "Who are you?"

"My name's Poco Kelly. Ever heard of me?"

She shook her head.

"Huh!" said Poco Kelly. "I guess you don't make a habit of reading South and Central American reward posters. They've always got my mug plastered on 'em somewhere. Seems like I always pick the wrong side in anybody's revolution."

"You're—you're a soldier of fortune?"

"No," said Kelly sadly. "Just a soldier—no fortune involved. Who are you?"

"Sue Carlyle."

"Sue," Poco Kelly repeated reflectively. "Good old Yank name, huh? But you haven't told me why those guys were chasing you or who they were."

"Did you ever hear of Manuel Sargi?"

"Hah!" said Kelly, snarling suddenly. "That slimy snake! The last time I ran across him I put a dent in his skull with a beer bottle. I didn't hit hard enough, though. He lived."

"Those were his men."

"And I let one get away!"

She remembered herself suddenly. "I've got to go now! I left my uncle—I'm afraid Sargi—"

"I'll go with you," Kelly said determinedly. "I want to meet Sargi again. He sold a general I was working for some machine-gun ammunition that had sand in it instead of powder. Damn' near got me killed. I got a bayonet through the ribs and this." He touched the saber scar on his cheek. "Yeah, that guy owes me for half an ear. There I was sitting in the middle of a field on the wrong end of a cavalry charge with a jammed machine-gun. Just one swipe with a beer bottle won't near pay for that."

"Look!" Sue said suddenly.

A group of figures had gathered at the mouth of the alley, peering into the dimness.

"Sargi's men!" she said in a tense whisper.

"NO," said Poco Kelly, recognizing the bulging figure in the forefront, "that's what passes in this pueblo for a police force. Watch."

He fired the sawed-off .45 into the air and followed its whamming report with a screech that sounded like a combination of a locomotive whistle and a banshee on a spree.

The men at the alley mouth boiled into frenzied action, pushing and shoving and mauling, fighting to get away. In seconds they were all gone.

"I won a lot of fights with that yell," Poco Kelly said. "It's sure a hair-raiser, ain't it? Let's go."

They dodged through a niche in the adobe walls, followed a crooked, twisting little alley through the thick blackness, came out into a street three blocks away. Poco was chuckling quietly.

"Did you see them run? That's the best yell I let out for a long time."

She stared up seriously at his face.

"You just killed two men," she said. "And you're laughing now."

"Why, yes," said Poco Kelly. "I did, and I am."

"You killed them to save me," she said in the same tone. "But you didn't know who they were, nor who I was. They might have been police chasing a thief."

"Yeah," said Poco Kelly, "they might have been, and they'd be just as dead now, and I wouldn't care. I figure if people are going to run at me in the dark waving knives around they're engaging in a pretty risky business. Whatever happens to them sort of comes under the head of hazards of this interesting but dangerous profession."

"Two men dead," she said, shivering a little.

"Why, yes," said Poco Kelly. "Two men dead in an alley. And I've seen a thousand go down in ten minutes, and every one of 'em worth more than those two multiplied by six. If they're Sargi's men they're in hell where they belong. I could tell you things about that snake. But I know what you mean, Sue Carlyle. I killed two men, and I don't seem very put out about it. You think I'm a pretty bad character, and maybe you'd like to get away from me. Maybe you're afraid of me."

She was very small and slim in her boy's clothes. She had small, even features, delicate yet with a resolute firmness. Her nose was short and straight and her lips soft. Her eyes were wide and blue, a much softer and deeper blue than Poco Kelly's.

"No," she said. "I'm not afraid of you. It's—it's just—that I'm not used to—to—"

"Murder and sudden death," said Kelly.

Abruptly she put out her hand. "I want you to be my friend, Poco Kelly."

Poco Kelly gripped her small hand firmly in his big one. "It's as good as done."

"We've got to get to my uncle. I'm worried. He's sick, and I had to leave him with Juan, our Hopi boy, while I went out to buy some provisions. Those men saw me—"

"Let's go," said Poco. "You can tell me the rest later."

CHAPTER II  
*"Make Them Pay!"*

IT was a little adobe hut with white walls and a sagging thatch roof, at the outskirts of the town, a little away from the rest of the houses. Alone and forlorn with the thick brush growing up around it hungrily. It looked deserted. There was no ray of light from the blackened windows in its thick walls.

Sue Carlyle's voice was thin with foreboding. "There was a light when I left. My uncle had a candle."

"He might have blown it out," Poco said comfortingly.

"No. No, he'd leave it for me. He was worried about me going out alone."

"Wait here, then," Kelly said.

He left her in the shadow of the scrub brush and went quietly toward the little house, moving as noiselessly as the drift of a shadow. At one of the sunken front windows he tried to peer in. There was no covering across the window, no light anywhere inside the house.

"Hello," said Poco softly. "Here's a friend."

There was no answer, no sound at all but the stealthy rustle of a lizard in the roof thatch. Poco slid around toward the front, flat against the wall, keeping below the level of the windows.

The front door was ajar on its sagging strip-leather hinges. Poco pushed it open and it grated on the dirt floor. He slid inside into the close, hot darkness and stood with his back against the wall, listening.

Poco Kelly had done a great deal of night prowling. It was no business in which to make wild guesses and a man didn't get the chance to make many mistakes. But he hadn't been standing against that wall for more than a minute before he knew that the little house was empty. He was in it alone.

He stepped out the front door and signaled to Sue Carlyle.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly, hurrying to him.

"There's no one here," Poco said. "Are you sure this is the place? This house has been empty ever since I hit town, and it's empty now."

"Yes," she whispered. "My uncle and Juan and I came in last night. We were hiding because—"

"No time for that now," Kelly said quickly. "Come inside."

They went quietly into the house.

"Stand away from me," Kelly ordered. "I'm going to strike a light, and there might be somebody wanting to take a shot through a window."

The match head sputtered into yellow flame under his thumbnail and threw the room into light and dancing shadows. It was small and bare. A rickety table, a couple of sagging chairs made of tanned cowhide, a straw pallet in the corner with a blanket over it.

"Ah!" Sue gave a sudden gasp.

She was staring at the straw pallet. The blanket was rumped, half pulled away, and there was a darkly sinister red stain on it. Poco saw now that the table had been dragged half across the room. The marks of its leg were scraped in the hard dirt floor. One of the chairs sat crookedly, its back legs broken.

"Uncle Jack!" Sue sobbed. "Sargi found him! They—they'll kill him!"

The match sputtered out in Poco Kelly's fingers, and in the sudden dark silence there was the faint scrape of feet from outside the hut.

"Quiet!" Poco whispered. "Stand flat against the wall. We're going to have callers."

Sliding the sawed-off .45 out of his shirtfront and cuddling its short butt familiarly in his palm he slipped to the door, stood flat against the wall beside it.

The scraping of feet came closer, slowly, furtively. Only one man. Poco reversed the gun in his hand, held it up over his shoulder, ready to strike.

THE scraping footsteps were at the door now, and someone was breathing hard. Raggedly panting gasps with a little bubble hidden deep in them.

"Senorita—" a voice said thickly.

"Juan!" Sue cried. "It's Juan, our Hopi boy!" She tried to push past Poco.

"Wait!" he said gently. "He may have been followed."

He opened the door wider. "Come in," he said.

The bubbling sound was thicker in the Indian boy's voice. "Senorita," he said weakly. "I can't—walk—any more—" With a thud his body hit the ground.

Poco Kelly jerked the door open. The Indian boy was lying flat on his face in the dust of the threshold, a thin, slight figure in dark trousers and a

white buckskin jacket decorated with gaily colored beads.

There was another color on the jacket now. Red. In a great spreading stain across the back.

"Stabbed!" said Kelly. "In the back!"

He lifted the slight, limp figure gently, carried it inside. He put the boy down on the straw pallet and, lighting another match, found a stub of candle that had rolled into a corner. Its jerking yellow flame chased the shadows back against the walls.

"Juan!" Sue choked. "Oh, Juanito! What happened? What have they done to you?"

The boy's face was thinly drawn, pale under the coppery tan. Great beads of perspiration were on his forehead, and his eyes, staring up at Sue Carlyle kneeling beside him, were bright and glittering with pain.

"Senorita!" he gasped, and thin frothy red bubbles formed and burst on his lips. "They came—after you had gone, knocked on the door. I—opened the door. There was—no one in sight. I stepped outside—to look. They caught me—struck me with the knife—"

"My uncle!" Sue cried. "The senor, Juan! Did they—did they—"

"They beat—the senor down with their fists. They took him—away—"

Sue stared at Poco Kelly with blue eyes that were deep wells of agony.

Juan was struggling to speak, gasping for breath. "I could not—help him. I was lying on the ground—like one dead—I could not rise. But when they left with the senor, I crawled, I crawled—"

"Yes?" Sue urged breathlessly. "Yes, Juan?"

"Crawled—crawled—followed them. The old white house—beside the road from the south. Used to be—an inn. Empty—took the senor there. I crawled—back—to tell you—"

"Over a mile," Poco Kelly said softly. "He crawled over a mile with that hole in his back, after they'd left him for dead."

Sue was sobbing, cradling Juan's head in her arms.

"Sargi," Juan said in the faintest whisper. "Sargi took—the senor. I—" His eyes closed wearily, and his breath was only a little bubbling mutter in his throat.

Again Sue was staring up at Poco Kelly. "Can't we do something for him? A doctor—something—"

Poco shook his head slowly. "He's dying," he said. "That knife went through his lungs, and

there's no telling how much blood he lost. Perhaps if he hadn't crawled so far—"

"Senorita," Juan whispered.

"Yes, Juan," she said, her voice choked.

"Senorita," Juan repeated faintly. The deep pain lines seemed to wash away from his young face. He smiled a little with his bloodstained lips. And then he wasn't breathing anymore.

Sue cried softly and brokenly.

Poco took off his hat. "God rest him," he said, "and keep him. He was very brave." He knelt down beside Juan and gently pulled the blanket over the still face.

He stood up and turned to Sue. "Now I want some information in a hurry. I know Sargi. He's a murderer and a liar and a thief. He runs a gang of cutthroats and specializes in smuggling. He's after you and your uncle. Why?"

"He knows we have a map he wants."

"Has your uncle got it?"

"No. I have it." As she touched the boy's blouse she wore something rustled a little.

"All right," said Poco. "I'm going after Sargi and your uncle. I know where that old inn is. You stay here. I can go faster and fight better without you to think about. Will you stay?"

She nodded, the tears on her cheeks glistening in the candlelight. "I'll stay here," she promised. And then suddenly she gripped his arm hard. "Only make them pay! Make them pay, Poco Kelly! For what they did to Juan—and my uncle!"

### CHAPTER III

#### *The Map of Human Skin*

PEDRO GUITERREZ could hear the screaming only faintly, and he kicked the rotted board that was the front step of the old inn and swore in a muttering undertone. He always missed the fun. He always got the worst jobs. Now he was assigned to guard the door with nothing to see but a few winking stars.

Another scream scaled up and up in a paean of agony, broke off into a bubbling wail. Hah! Pedro thought, that was a good one. He would have liked to have seen the old man's face when he uttered it.

The old man was stubborn, but he'd break pretty soon. Gold! Pedro Guterrez could imagine it in a glittering yellow pile, could feel it weighing down his pockets, could taste the good liquor it would buy. Gold!

He heard a sudden little scuffling noise behind him in the darkness. He whirled around, half raising the short carbine he carried under one arm. A black, towering shadow was very close—the swirl of an arm swinging toward him.

That was all that Pedro Guterrez ever saw in this world. There was a muffled thump, a little crunching sound. Pedro Guterrez went sprawling in the soft dust and never moved again.

**P**OCO KELLY leaned over him a second, straightened up. He mounted the rotting steps noiselessly, knelt in front of the big door.

The scream came again, a wailing screech that went on and on as if it would never stop and then did stop suddenly in mid-note. A gloating laugh followed the scream, an ugly, oily sound that raised the bristles at the back of Poco Kelly's neck. He knew that laugh.

Bracing himself against the thick wall and raising his right foot, he drove the heel with terrific force against the door just under the rusty lock. The door flung open, smashed back against the wall with a battering thud that echoed in empty rooms like a thunderclap.

The room into which Poco burst was long, low, and littered with splintered and broken furniture. A big table stood in its center and on its top a man was bound flat on his back. His bare feet extended over the end of the table, but they no longer resembled feet. They were horribly blackened lumps with red, raw flesh showing through the seared skin. The sickening smell of burned flesh filled the room. The man's face was turned toward Poco Kelly, his mouth twisted into an agonized grimace. He was an old man with a short-clipped grey beard, and a bloody bandage was wound around his head.

Three other men were in the room. One evidently had been standing in front of the door when Poco Kelly kicked it in. He was sprawling on the floor, and now he sat up dazedly and reached for the rifle lying beside him.

Poco Kelly's first bullet took him squarely in the mouth and blew out the back of his skull.

"Sargi!" Poco snarled. He was crouched in the shadows of the doorway with the .45 poked out in front of him. "Sargi! You rat!"

Sargi, standing beside the table, had the lighted stub of a candle in his hand. He had been applying the flame to the bound man's bare feet when Poco

Kelly came in. He couldn't see Poco, hidden in the shadows of the doorway, but he recognized the voice.

"Poco Kelly!"

Sargi was small, only a little over five feet, and slight. His face was dark and thin and cruel, cut blackly across by a small waxed mustache and his eyes were so light they looked white—a smoky flinty white. High-heeled boots increased his height and he wore a big sombrero with little silver bells around the wide brim, with a twisted leather cord that looped under his chin, a short decorated vest and tight Mexican trousers with a slash of red velvet inset in the legs at the bottoms.

His lieutenant, Gorgio, stood beside him, an immense man, thickly powerful, with a flat, stupid face and dull little eyes.

Sargi moved like a streak as he uttered Poco Kelly's name. He dropped the candle stub, swiped viciously at another candle on a chair, the only other light in the shadow-filled room.

Poco Kelly shot. Sargi was whirling when the bullet hit him and it knocked him into the chair, smashing into the floor, snuffing out the candle.

Poco shot again into the thick darkness, twice, and lunged forward. He stumbled over a broken table, went sprawling on hands and knees. The rattle of his fall and the hurried pound of footsteps mingled.

Pushing himself up to a squatting position, Kelly crouched on the floor, listening. The room was silent all of a sudden—no sound anywhere. Then he heard the pounding thud of horses' hoofs from outside the inn.

Poco spun around, made the door in two long jumps. The horses were already better than fifty yards away. Kelly recognized Gorgio's thick figure on one, saw the spare outline of Sargi on the other. Sargi hadn't been wounded badly enough to prevent his riding.

**P**OCO fired twice, but the range was too great for the sawed-off barrel of the .45. The horses clattered over the top of a knoll, out of sight.

Stepping back inside the inn, Poco snapped a match on his thumbnail. The spurting yellow flame showed the wreck of the room, the man he had shot lying on the floor.

Kelly leaped to the table where the old man lay bound. The tortured figure was lying very still, the face still twisted in its agonized grimace. The black

handle of a knife stood up straight directly over his heart, and blood was spreading in a slow stain on his ragged shirt.

Sargi's work, that knife. Like a scotched snake, when he was wounded he had struck at the first thing into which he could sink his fangs. The old man was dead—

No light was showing when Poco Kelly approached the house where he had left Sue Carlyle. He paused in the shelter of the thick brush and whistled softly.

Sue Carlyle appeared in the doorway, watching him silently as he approached her.

"My—my uncle is dead," she said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," Poco said.

"Sargi killed him."

"Yes."

She nodded slowly. "I knew it. I knew my uncle would never tell Sargi where the map was." All her tears were gone now, but sorrow had pinched her face, made her seem older.

Poco Kelly said nothing. There was nothing he could say. It was better not to tell her about the manner of her uncle's death.

"It was only about two hours ago that I met you and yet it seems like years," she said slowly. "I—I can't ever thank you for what you've done, Poco Kelly."

Poco shook his head uncomfortably. "I didn't help things much."

"You did everything that any man could—more than any other man would have done— Now I want to tell you what was the cause of everything tonight—"

"Not unless you want to," Poco told her. "I've fought in a lot of wars without knowing why they started."

"I would rather talk than—than think. Here—" She took a small oilskin pouch from her blouse and handed it to him. "You take it out. I—I hate to touch it."

He untied the drawstring of the pouch and took out a thin, fine-textured piece of leather. It was light, like chamois skin, only it was not chamois skin. Faint spidery lines were traced on it in red in a weird-looking design.

"The map Sargi wanted?" Poco asked, looking up from it.

She nodded. "Yes. A treasure map. It was made of human skin."

"Human skin!" Poco Kelly repeated, startled.

She shivered. "Yes—skin torn from the chest of a dead Spanish *capitan*. Dead almost two hundred years, now. It's a weird, horrible story—it always makes me shiver just to think about it. That map was made by a criminal by the name of Pedro Lacerein. Long ago, when Mexico belonged to Spain, he killed a man and ran for the desert country near where the Border is now to hide. I think he must have been insane, because the Indians thought he was a great medicine man and let him wander wherever he pleased."

"A map made by a madman out of human skin," Poco said softly.

"Yes. In his wanderings Pedro Lacerein found a gold deposit. It must have been just a pocket, but it was a large one and almost pure gold. He got the idea of buying himself a pardon with the gold, so he took samples of the gold, went down into Mexico, surrendered to the authorities and made his mad proposition. Their cupidity was aroused by the gold samples and they pretended to fall in with his plan to buy his pardon. They sent a small detachment of soldiers and workers back into the desert country with him, found the gold again, mined the pocket."

"And then?" Poco asked.

"The Spanish *capitan* who led the expedition talked too much. After they had the gold, he saw no point in continuing to fool Pedro Lacerein and told him the truth. The Spanish officials had no intention of pardoning him. They had tricked him to get the gold and he would hang for his crime."

"A nice doublecross," Poco said.

**“YES.** Pedro Lacerein was raging at being tricked. He escaped into the desert, led some of his Indian friends back to the Spanish camp. They attacked at night and killed every one of the Spaniards. Pedro Lacerein blamed the Spanish *capitan* for the whole trick. He made two maps out of his skin. One map showed where Pedro Lacerein and his Indian allies had buried the gold the Spaniards had mined.”

"And the other?" Poco Kelly asked.

"This is it," Sue pointed to the one Kelly held. "It shows where that first map is hidden."

Poco Kelly held the map to the light, trying to trace the faint spidery lines, the scribbled words.

"It's in Spanish," she said. "It indicates a spot on the watercourse near a mountain called Thlotec,

that is the Tres Piños River in the rainy season.”

“I know that place!” Poco nodded. “About four days travel south of here. I passed it on my way up.”

“Yes. There’s a big rock shaped like a skull. It must be quite large from the description. The map is hidden in a little iron box under the rock. Lacerein buried the box and rolled the rock on top of it. He was disgusted with white men by then, so he went back and lived with the Indians, a bigger medicine man than before. He died with them. He never went back for his treasure. He had no use for gold.”

“How did you get the map?”

“My—my uncle found it. He wasn’t any real relation to me. He was my father’s partner. My mother died when I was born, and when my father was killed in a mine cave-in several years later Uncle Jack—John Burns was his name—took me in as one of his family and raised me. Recently he’s been an Indian agent on a reservation in Arizona—with the same tribe with which Pedro Lacerein lived and died. The map was a souvenir that had been presented to one of the other agents years ago. He didn’t know it had any value, but he framed it and hung it on the office wall. It was there for years.”

Poco whistled softly. “A fortune gathering dust on the wall!”

“Exactly. Uncle Jack was interested in tribal legends and naturally he heard this one about Pedro Lacerein and his map of human skin. One day an old Indian identified the picture on the office wall as the map in the skin of Lacerein. Uncle Jack had the map analyzed, found it was human skin. And the faded writing was that of Pedro Lacerein written in the blood of the Spanish *capitan*.”

Yeah, and the map’s subsequent history was also written in blood, Poco was thinking grimly.

“The man who analyzed the map talked. Manuel Sargi heard of it and he came to my uncle and claimed the map, said he was a direct descendant of Pedro Lacerein. He isn’t, and he couldn’t show a bit of proof. Besides, my uncle knew him for a criminal. He refused to give him the map and Sargi threatened him. He swore he’d kill my uncle to get it.”

“He’d kill anybody to get a dime,” Poco said, his lips tight. “But Sargi’s no relation of Pedro Lacerein. He’s not even Spanish, though he claims to be. He’s about a third Portuguese, a third Indian,

and a third Chinese. How much gold is there?”

Sue shook her head. “No telling. The legend was too vague. Evidently quite a lot. Uncle Jack and Juan and I slipped over the border to find the second map. If we found it, then we could bring a bigger party and find the gold itself. We traveled secretly, at night, because we knew Sargi would be watching for us. Uncle Jack got sick—and then Sargi found us anyway.”

“He has his men all through this country,” Poco told her. “What are you going to do now?”

Her lips grew firmly resolute. “Go on—alone. I’ve got to. You see, Uncle Jack and I weren’t interested in the gold for itself. Uncle Jack has a son four years older than I am. He was terribly injured in an airplane crash. His spine was hurt. He’s been in the hospital for a year now, and it’s taken every cent of money Uncle Jack had saved. He can be cured—be all right—but it will take another year, several operations. He has to go back East, see specialists, have nurses day and night. His son was all Uncle Jack had. Now that son has only me.”

“You?” Poco said softly.

“We were to have been married the day he crashed. He was flying to our wedding.” She held out her hand. “Good-by, Poco Kelly.”

“Why, no,” said Poco. “I think I’ll go along with you just for the ride, if you don’t mind.”

She stared at him for a moment, then firmly shook her head. “No. You’ve risked your life for me a dozen times tonight. Now you want to help me more because you’re sorry for me. I won’t have you being sorry for me! I can take care of myself! It’s my fight!”

“You’re wrong,” said Poco Kelly gravely. “I’m not a bit sorry for you, and I don’t go around helping damsels in distress. I was thinking that if I was along when you found that gold I might be able to slip a few pieces in my pocket when you weren’t looking.”

She smiled a little. “You’re not a very good liar, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, yes,” grinned Poco. “An expert. But I’ll tell you the truth for a change. I haven’t got any place to go right now, and even if I had I haven’t got any money to go there with. So how would you like to hire a soldier? Honest, I’m a pretty fair fighter when I get going.”

“You mean that?” she asked gravely.

Poco Kelly held out his hand, and they shook

gravely.

"And now," he said, "we've got to move. The authorities in this country stay pretty well under cover at night, but tomorrow they'll be going strong. They'll want a lot of explanations. And then there's always Sargi. I wounded him tonight, and I hope he dies of blood poison. Have you horses?"

"Yes. Hidden back in the brush further out from town."

"We'd better be riding south then."

"There—there's Juan and—and Uncle Jack."

"We can't help them now," said Poco. "They'd want you to do it if they could speak—ride on."

#### CHAPTER IV *Captured*

FOR three days they had been riding south, swinging in a wide semicircle toward the spot where the now dry Tres Piños River's course went near the mountain called Thlotec. It was magnificent country, ripped and tumbled and slashed by the earth's tortured writhings in ages long dead. Mountains tossed up like giant monuments with the rock showing red and grey and blue on their scarred sides. Shadowed gorges cool even in the dazzling hot glare of the sun.

They had seen no one. There had been no signs of pursuit by Sargi and his men, and Poco Kelly was beginning to hope that the man had died of his wound.

Then— It happened without warning, in the morning with the sun fighting its way brightly through the mist. They were riding single file through a steep-walled little canyon with Poco ahead on the gaunt roan that had belonged to John Burns. Sue was behind him, and following her the pack-horse carrying their provisions and gear.

They had almost reached the mouth of the canyon when Poco saw a glinting little spark from the brush high on one wall. It moved a little, then glinted again. He swung around in the saddle to stare at the opposite wall. A bush was moving a little there, as though the breeze were shaking its limbs. Only there was no breeze.

Poco acted instantly. He jerked his horse back on its haunches, reached back and caught the rein of Sue's dun. He hauled it savagely around, while she stared at him in white-faced consternation.

"Ambush!" Poco yelled at her.

He slashed the dun with his quirt, and it went

pounding down the canyon with Sue clinging to its back.

A rifle suddenly *whammed* up on the canyon side and Poco saw dust spurt up under the dun's flying feet.

"*Aiiyaah!*" Poco Kelly howled at the top of his voice.

He jerked John Burns' carbine from the sheath on the saddle and went charging up the canyon, firing blindly into the brush as fast as he could pump the lever.

Other reports came, biting sharply through the thin air, and powder smoke drifted in a thin haze over the brush.

Poco hauled the roan around and dug in his spurs, charging up into the brush. A man suddenly rose up beside him. Poco slammed him over the head with the butt of the empty carbine.

And then there were men all around him, popping out of the brush like life-sized jack-in-the-boxes. Swart, chunky men with broad, dark faces and cartridge belts crisscrossed across their chests like queerly savage ornaments.

"*Aiiyaah!*" Poco Kelly howled, and spurred the maddened horse into their center, swinging the carbine over his head like a war club.

THREE smacking reports came all at once. Poco felt the roan shudder under him, then it went down, sliding heavily over the rocks. He kicked clear and got half to his feet, jerking the sawed-off .45 out of his shirtfront but he never got a chance to use it. A rifle barrel smashed across his head and he seemed to shoot down into blackness that was liquidly soft and closed over his head like a thick, dark blanket—

The jarring awoke Poco Kelly first. Then the ache in his head. It felt like someone was driving red-hot rivets in front of each ear. He opened his eyes dazedly and found that he was riding a horse—a ratty, shaggy little animal that picked its way nimbly along the trail without any guidance.

Poco tried to raise his hands to feel his head and made another discovery. His hands were tied tightly behind him.

He blinked and increased the range of his vision. A man was riding ahead of him. He could see the broad back with its crisscrossing cartridge belts, the sweat-stained, ragged shirt, the floppy Mexican sombrero. Poco twisted around. More men were strung out behind him, riding silently.

They were the men he had fought in the canyon. He recognized the broad, dark faces, the glittering, cruel little eyes staring at him impassively.

"Hey, you!" Poco called to the leader.

The man riding in front paid no attention.

"Hey, dog-face!" Poco called in a louder tone.

The man pulled off the trail a little and let Poco's horse come up abreast. He resembled the other men except for the broad blue scar that ran jaggedly on the diagonal across his face, bisecting the middle of his flattened nose. He looked at Poco's bonds, grunted at him.

"Who the hell are you?" Poco demanded. "And where do you think you're taking me?"

"Uh!" the man said, pulling his horse ahead again.

**P**OCO made another try. "Sargi's men?"

The man turned to stare back at him. "*El Aguila*."

"Ho!" said Kelly, surprised.

*El Aguila*—"the Eagle." It was the imposing name self-selected by a not so very imposing gentleman. *El Aguila*, to hear him tell it, was a man who soared high above the desolate land of his mother country and swooped down screeching on the oppressors of the *peon*. As a matter of fact he was merely a murderer and a thief who would steal anything he could lay hands on. He was also an accomplished liar and braggart and so treacherous it was said he couldn't even look himself in the eye in the mirror when shaving.

The cavalcade with Poco Kelly in its midst cut through a narrow, twisting gorge, came out into a little pocket. A cluster of adobe huts was dead ahead, evidently *El Aguila's* temporary headquarters.

They rode up to the accompaniment of the yapping of scrawny dogs. Women, wearing thick skirts and bright blouses, loaded down with cheap, flashy jewelry peered out of dark doorways with indolent disinterest. Fat, brown children played naked in the thick dirt, staring with brightly curious eyes.

The scarred leader pulled up in front of the largest hut, dismounted.

"Hello, *Aguila*," Poco said to the man who came lazily out of the door.

"Ah, Poco Kelly," said *El Aguila*.

The Eagle had been a section hand in the United States before he took up the more languorous, as

well as more profitable, life of a bandit chief and could speak passable English. He was short and greasily fat with a round face that had no more expression in it than the painted face of a cheap doll. His eyes were small and black, dully slick, and no matter what expression the rest of his face assumed they always stared emotionlessly with a savage little flicker deep back in them.

"This is a hell of a greeting," Poco said, indicating his bound hands with a jerk. "What's the idea?"

*El Aguila* smiled. "My frien', I am desolate. But you have the something we are wanting."

The bandit with the scarred face had untied the leather thongs that bound Poco's feet under his horse, and now he jerked him out of the saddle. Poco stumbled on rubbery legs, caught himself.

"We want?" he questioned.

"Oh, yes," said *El Aguila*.

Another man appeared in the doorway of the house—Sargi. He walked carefully and his thin, dark face looked palely tired. His left arm was in a sling, and a bandage on his left shoulder bulged his shirt.

"Hello, you snake," Poco Kelly said.

Sargi paid no attention. "The girl!" he exclaimed. "Where's the girl?"

The scarred man grunted something to *El Aguila*. Poco Kelly couldn't understand. It was some Indian dialect—probably Yaqui.

"He says she got away," *El Aguila* translated.

"Got away!" Sargi screeched. "You fool, she's the one we wanted! Not this red pig!"

The scarred man spoke in a rumbling mutter.

"He says he searched Poco Kelly," *El Aguila* said. "He has carry nothing that looks like a map."

"Of course not!" Sargi snarled. "Do you think the girl would trust that map out of her hands?"

The scarred man spoke some more, illustrating with short, choppy gestures. *El Aguila* looked curiously at Kelly.

"He says Poco Kelly is see them hiding. He make girl for run away, and then he charge at them all alone. He fight like crazy. They think they're going to have to kill him until one hit him with rifle."

"Why didn't they kill him?" Sargi asked, angrily. "We don't want him!" He jerked a Luger automatic from under his short jacket.

*Aguila* moved like a streak, knocked the Luger to the ground. "No! Anybody's get killed, I say

so!"

Sargi cursed in a hissing stream of words, nursing his wrist.

The scarred man spoke again, staring angrily at Sargi. He resented criticism. And *El Aguila* translated.

"He says he sends three men after this girl. They'll be getting her."

"Maybe!" Sargi said. "Then kill this red pig now! He'll only make trouble!"

"No," *El Aguila* decided. "We shut him up now. We kill him pretty soon—when we find girl."

"Thanks for nothing," Kelly said.

*El Aguila's* scarred lieutenant and two more of his men dragged Poco Kelly around in back of their chief's hut to another and smaller hut with only thin slits in its adobe walls to serve for windows. Its thick door was studded with iron bolts and it had an iron crossbar. They hurled Kelly into the darkly shadowed interior of the hut.

"You sure have swell guest's quarters," Poco remarked. "How's for taking off these ropes, dog-face, or are you afraid I'll break out of here and beat up on your whole army bare-handed?" He held his bound hands out toward the scar-faced man and grimaced. The man hesitated a second, then shrugged. He cut the leather thongs with his sheath knife.

"You're sure nice to me," Kelly said sourly.

When they slammed the big door of the hut on him it was as though an immense hand had been clapped down, shutting off all light and air and the hurried, babbling noises of the encampment, the brown, curiously peering faces of the children.

Poco stretched his arms in the darkness. He felt the back of his head gingerly and grunted a little when he touched the egg-shaped lump there.

As his eyes grew more accustomed to the dim light he looked curiously around. It was a one-room hut, no more than ten feet in diameter, absolutely bare. Not one piece of furniture. Only the bare, streaked walls of adobe, the slit-like windows, the heavily thatched roof.

**P**OCO KELLY'S gaunt face was serious, worried. He was in a bad spot, and he had been in enough of them to realize that this was one out of which he wasn't going to be able to talk his way. *El Aguila* had meant just what he had said about shooting Poco. He would likely have done it already except that he had wanted to impress Sargi

with his leadership in his own camp. One more murder wouldn't be much of a burden on *El Aguila's* bloodstained soul. And then there was Sargi. That murderer would certainly do for him at the first opportunity.

It was not a cheerful outlook, but Poco Kelly shrugged. He never spent much time worrying, had long since come to the conclusion that it didn't do much good.

He searched through his pockets. The scarred lieutenant had done a good job. He had not left one single article but he had left Poco his belt buckle. It was an army belt buckle that Kelly had picked up during the war in the Chaco, was made of heavy bronze, slightly oval, about six inches long and almost two inches wide.

Poco Kelly detached it from his belt and weighed it thoughtfully in his hand. It didn't seem to have much utility as a weapon. Kelly squinted at it a long time calculatingly. It was all he had. It was up to him to make some use of it.

Suddenly he had an idea. He dug his heel into the floor of the hut. The dirt was hard, well-packed—but it was dirt. Kelly grinned tightly.

In the corner behind the door he knelt on the floor, commenced to dig at the earth against the wall. The belt buckle didn't serve so well as a spade. It kept turning in his hand and the dirt didn't seem to get much softer as he went down. But he kept at it patiently. He had dug out of much better jails than this with less to work with.

## CHAPTER V

### *When Thieves Fall Out—*

**I**T was almost an hour later when he heard the iron crossbar on the door squeak against the bolt heads as it was lifted. By the time the door swung back he was sitting in the farthest corner from the hole he had been digging, with his hat pulled down over his eyes as though dozing.

It was the scarred lieutenant. He peered into the dimness of the hut, blinking. Poco Kelly tipped his hat up from his eyes and yawned.

"What the hell do you want?" He inquired crossly. "Don't you ever give your guests any privacy around here?"

The man held a heavy automatic in his hand. He gestured with it commandingly and grunted at Kelly.

Poco was a little white around the lips, but he

got up casually and sauntered toward the door. The scarred man caught him by the arm and dragged him out into the open. The bright sunlight was like steely hot needles poking at his eyes as he stumbled forward with the man's gun poking him in the back. He got a blurred impression of naked brown children, of indifferently staring women and a few of *El Aguila's* men lounging in the shade. And then Poco was being pushed inside *El Aguila's* hut.

The Eagle sat in a rawhide chair, fatly squashy, behind a roughly hewn table made of logs that had been halved and fitted together with the smooth sides up. Another of his men was sitting beside the door with a carbine across his knees. Sargi sat on the side of the table nearest the door with his big follower, Gorgio, standing directly behind him.

And in the corner, looking small and frightened, with blue eyes staring widely, sat Sue Carlyle.

Poco Kelly frowned. "I was hoping you'd slipped them," he said. "Did they hurt you?"

She shook her head silently, tight-lipped.

The scarred man shoved Kelly from behind again. Taking advantage of it, Kelly pretended to stumble and fell headlong on top of Sargi. They crashed on the floor in a writhing heap as Sargi screamed with the pain of his wounded shoulder.

Before Gorgio could make a move, the scarred man picked Poco Kelly up off the floor as easily as if he had been a child and planked him down in another chair on the opposite side of the table. Poco sat there, blinking innocently.

Sargi fought his way up off the floor. His elaborately brocaded jacket had been soiled by the dirt floor and there was a black smear across his cheek. He was spitting incoherent blasphemy and jerking at the hilt of the knife under his jacket.

"No!" *El Aguila* said. "You be sitting down!"

Sargi's breath whistled through his thin nostrils. "He—he did that on purpose—"

"Sitting down!" *El Aguila's* sleepy voice suddenly cracked like a whiplash.

Reluctantly Sargi settled back into his righted chair, holding his wounded shoulder and glaring malevolently at Poco Kelly.

Poco was paying no attention to him. A coldly dull gleam from the far corner of the room had caught his eye. Two machine-guns lay there, side by side, with their long glinting belts of ammunition already attached. Poco was aware that the difference between a successful bandit leader and an unsuccessful—and dead one—is often no

more than a couple of ready machine-guns with which to argue at the proper moment. And so *El Aguila* kept his right at hand.

"Ah, now," said the Eagle, smiling around at them, "now we are being all together so we can be talking." He glanced at Kelly. "My men are chasing the girl and catching her like I'm telling you. But I'm don't finding any map on her."

"So," said Poco, and there was a nasty gleam in his blue eyes. He hadn't the slightest idea where the map was. Sue Carlyle had been carrying it at the time *El Aguila's* men had ambushed them. But he fabricated a story instantly with the ease of long practice.

"Sure she didn't have it. I had it all the time."

"You?" *El Aguila* said, surprised.

Sargi twitched and muttered in his chair.

Poco nodded calmly. "Yeah—had it sewed in my pants. See?" He pointed to a rip in his trousers he had acquired when *El Aguila's* men had shot the roan from under him.

The bandit's cruelly glittering eyes stared calculatingly at him. "Where's that map being now, eh?"

"I burned it."

Sargi cursed in a choking mutter.

"Burned!" *El Aguila* exclaimed incredulously.

"Yup," said Poco calmly. "It was kind of hard to burn. Took a long time, but I made it. I memorized the directions on it first."

"You mem'rise directions?" *El Aguila* repeated. "You be telling them to us now!"

"That's where you're wrong," Kelly said.

"You talk—or you get shot!" The Mexican nodded to the scarred man, standing behind Kelly, and the safety on the automatic clicked suggestively.

"That'll be your hard luck," Poco said easily. "The only way you'll get those directions is to have me tell 'em to you, and I probably won't feel like talking if I have a bullet in my brain."

*Aguila's* eyes were like blackly glittering little slits of obsidian. "You talk!" he said in a hissing whisper.

The scarred man pushed the muzzle of his automatic against Poco's ear.

**S**UE CARLYLE suddenly gave a cry. "No. Don't! I'll tell! Not a word of what he said about the map was true! He was lying to save me! I was carrying it with me, and when those men

started to chase me I threw it into the brush. I know where I threw it. I can find it again!"

"Ah, so," said *El Aguila*, and reassumed his greasy smile.

"You see?" Sargi snarled. "I told you this red pig would do nothing but cause us trouble! He would have tricked you then if it hadn't been for the girl! He's a better bluffer than you are!"

"Every time I see you, you remind me more of a skunk," Poco said. "You even smell like one."

Sargi cursed in a spitting snarl. He whipped the knife from under his jacket and lunged across the table at Kelly, slashing viciously at his throat.

Poco ducked back in his chair and the scarred man behind him caught the glittering blade on the barrel of his automatic deflecting it with a grating clash. And then there was a soft, ringing little thud on the top of the table.

Everyone in the room froze into startled immobility, staring at the object that had made the noise. It was a little yellow slug lying on the rough boards of the table and gleaming softly, richly yellow.

Gold! There was no mistaking it from its appearance or the sound it made when it fell. Fell out of the silken folds of Sargi's shirt.

"Well, well," said Poco. "I was wondering why it was you were so anxious to kill me. You wanted to shut me up before I told *El Aguila* where the map was, because you'd already found the treasure. You knew if he got the map and found where the gold had been it wouldn't take him long to figure out who had it, and you didn't want to split it with him."

"A lie!" Sargi gasped, jerking back a little.

They all saw it happen this time—saw another little golden slug slip out of Sargi's shirtfront, fall tinkling to the tabletop to roll beside the first. Sargi stared at them, his whitish eyes bulging incredulously.

"So," said *El Aguila* in a whisper. "You make for double-crossing me, eh?"

**S**ARGI shot him a glance, startled. *El Aguila* was moving slowly, like some fatly sluggish spider, drawing the pearl-handled revolver from the holster at his waist.

Without a word or the slightest sign of warning, Sargi whipped forward as fast as a striking snake and buried his knife up to the hilt in *El Aguila's* thick chest.

Then the whole room exploded into action. As Poco Kelly kicked his chair over backwards the smashing roar of the automatic in the scarred man's hand almost deafened him. The scarred man had shot at Sargi, and he shot again and again. The impact of the bullets spun Sargi against the wall, knocked him into a twitching heap.

Poco Kelly rolled over on the floor and dived for the machine-guns in the corner. Gorgio shot pointblank at the scarred man and in the same second the man in the doorway shot at Gorgio with his carbine. The room rocked with the explosions. The air was thickly blue with powder smoke.

Gorgio's thick body fell heavily across the table. The whole side of his face was gone. The scarred man was down on his knees, both hands folded across his chest, gaping, while the blood ran thickly red out of the corners of his mouth. *El Aguila* had never moved. He was still sitting in his chair with the knife hilt standing up blackly straight over his heart.

Poco fell over one of the machine-guns, jerked it around, found the grip.

The first burst of bullets was high. It chewed the door into splinters just over the head of the man with the carbine. He screamed in terror, tripped over his own feet, fell out of the door.

"*Muert'!*" he shrieked incoherently. "*El Aguila es muert'!*"

Kelly dragged the machine-gun over to the door and let a couple of bursts go at the nearby huts, shooting high. The whole camp was in a riotous uproar with the hoarse yells of the men, the screams of the women, the piping squalls of children, the shrill yapping of excited dogs. A few aimless rifle shots popped out, but none of the bullets came near *El Aguila's* hut.

Kelly let the machine-gun racket through a couple more bursts. Then he ducked back inside the hut, grabbed *El Aguila's* sodden body, hauled it to the door and hurled it outside. It rolled over and over limply in the dust.

"Listen, you men!" Poco yelled in Spanish, and there was comparative quiet for a second. "*El Aguila* is dead! I had nothing to do with his death as the man who was in here can tell you! I have no quarrel with you! Go your way in peace! If you don't, I use the gun that talks fast!"

He let the machine-gun roar as suggestive emphasis to his words. When he stopped it, he could hear the man who had been in the room

shrieking that what he had said was true—telling them that Sargi had killed *El Aguila*, and that Sargi was dead, killed by the scarred lieutenant. The mad red one had done nothing, but now he had the machine-gun and he knew how to use it.

Poco Kelly let the machine-gun racket an agreement with this last thought. He dusted bullets up and down the empty street, whipping the dust into writhing clouds, let them chug through the thatched roofs of nearby buildings.

When he stopped the camp was churning with concerted motion, but it was motion away from *El Aguila's* hut. The bandit's men could see no sense in charging at a madman armed with a machine-gun when there was no point in it and their general was dead.

Sue Carlyle was kneeling close beside Poco. "Are—are they going to attack?" she whispered.

"Maybe something," Kelly said cheerfully, "but not us. They don't like the machine-gun. They're pulling out."

She held out her hand with the two little slugs gleaming on her palm. "All—all this was for

nothing. Sargi found the treasure and he surely must have hidden it somewhere else."

"Oh, no," Poco said calmly. "I've got it."

"You!"

"Sure. I slipped those slugs into Sargi's shirt when I fell on top of him. That's why he was sorta surprised when they popped out all of a sudden. Remember that map you had with all the directions about the rock like a skull and the Tres Piños and the mountain was only a map showing where the treasure *map* was hidden. Well, I found the treasure without any map. It's under that hut where they had me shut up. I found it while I was tryin' to dig under the wall. It's sure a joke on old *El Aguila*. He was lookin' all over for the treasure and all the time it was in his jail!"

"But—" Sue said faintly.

"Say," Poco said thoughtfully. "I hope those birds leave an extra horse. I want to take this machine-gun along with us. It's a good one—brand-new. I need a machine-gun. I had to pawn the last one I had in Tampico."