

was to catch you and hand you over to the proper authorities."

"I didn't kill Rattlesnake! It was—"

Charley broke off and darted a furtive glance about into the dark corners. Then he moistened his lips, nervously.

"Remember," warned Dodge, "everything you say now will come against you later. I will be put under oath to repeat your exact words. I'd rather you didn't talk about the matter."

"Well, I'm gonna talk, an' you gotta listen! It's the gospel truth I'm tellin' an' if only I had had a witness to back me up, I'd—well, I'd never a' had to run away."

"Ha! There's the point!" cried Dodge, interested in spite of himself. "If you are not the guilty man, why did you try to escape? That's the question we'd like you to answer."

"You didn't mebbe notice a stranger in Red Bluff on the afternoon of—"

"Of the murder? N—o—o. Wait! Yes, I believe I did hear something about a stranger raising a row in the bar of the Grand Union."

"A big, dark fellow—foreign-lookin'?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him. I only heard about him."

"It must a' been the same! He's the sort o' guy that'd raise the old Harry wherever he went."

"Who?"

"Delfrio."

Pederson half whispered the word—again glancing anxiously around. Dodge lifted his brows.

"A Mexican?"

Pederson nodded.

"He was the leader of a gang o' cut-throats and border ruffians. Poor Rattlesnake uster belong to the same gang."

"What was he doing up here?" demanded the sergeant, only half believing the tale.

"He come up to git poor Jack—near as I can make out. We two was sittin' peaceable over our cards that night an' he walked in. Jack's face—well, y'd orter seen it! It turned the color o' tallow! Jack, y' see, had escaped an' come up here an' begun to live kinder half-decent, but he'd broken his parole or deserted his secret society, whatever it was called, an' they was bound t' have vendetta on him."

"Go on. What happened, then?"

"Well—this Delfrio kep' talkin' Mexican at first an' it was plain t' see he was drunk already, but he'd carted out three bottles from town, so—we all—"

"You all got drunk?"

"You've hit it. I really don't remember nothin' more—only that Delfrio and Jack begun to quarrel."

"And you didn't draw a knife—or point a revolver?"

"No! I swear it! I remember seein' Jack down on the floor with his face all blood an' then this Delfrio come over an' shook me an' sez: 'You're the man that killed Jack! You'd better clear out!' an' I—I cleared!"

"And left them there?"

Pederson nodded.

"I got on my horse an' went off at a good clip. The wind sorter cleared my head after a while an' I really thought I had drawn my knife at Jack. I got so I believed I was—the murderer. But all them long months in the hills brought me to my senses. Never in the world could I have killed Jack!"

background of the night, stood Rattlesnake Jack! The pair at the table sat transfixed, their eyes bulging.

"Well—ain't some o' you fellers got a tongue?" demanded Jack with a smile.

Pederson passed a shaking hand across his eyes. Dodge rose unsteadily, clutching the side of the table. That was certainly Jack's voice!

And, excepting for a long, red scar across his cheek, he looked the same Jack as when he had last been seen alive!

He was dressed as he always had been, and upon his head was the rakish hat with the rattlesnake skin around the crown. He wore a cartridge belt, and a revolver at his right side glittered in its holster.

"What? Don't I get no welcome?" he asked, throwing down a whip he carried, with a laugh.

"Jack—Jack—fer Gawd's sake—is it you?"

Pederson spoke in a half whisper. The muscles of his face were working and his eyes stared glassily at his old friend.

"Of course it's me! What you fellers think I am—a ghost?"

"Where is—where is Delfrio?" demanded the Swede.

"Him? He's done for, and served him right!"

Jack drew out a chair from the wall, sat down, struck a match on his boot sole and lighted a small pipe he had drawn from his pocket. Dodge now found voice.

"We're very glad to see you back, Mr. Rattlesnake—er—I don't know your full name—but there are a few things to explain. Where have you been since March 22nd?"

"I've been in Mexico since April 7th. It took me some time to get there."

"What made you go down there, in such a hurry?"

"I couldn't help myself. I was unconscious at the time of leaving."

"Oh—they sandbagged you?"

"They surely did! Delfrio and his pal toted me away, an' when I woke up I was down in Wyoming, an' there wasn't nobody with me then but Delfrio."

"Where had his pal disappeared to?"

"His pal had been murdered and thrown into a slough seven or eight miles from here, because he got sorry an' wanted to give up an' leave me be. Delfrio gashed my cheek. Pretty, ain't it?"

"Delfrio murdered him?"

Jack nodded.

"When I found out about it I went right on down to Mexico. I had some friends there, an' I got papers an' went across the line to a United States marshal I uster know. It was out o' his jurisdiction, but he pulled wires for me at the border town an' I got Delfrio pinched. I had to lay low, on account o' my old gang."

"Was he hung?" asked the sergeant.

"No, he was shot by a firing squad, an' the rest o' the gang was rounded up inside o' four weeks or so. They were

a bunch o' roughnecks for sure. They're all doin' time now."

"And what has kept you away so many months?"

"I was in Villa's army for a while. Had to make a livin' somehow, an' nearly everybody down there is fightin' I had to borrow money to come home."

"You—you ain't heard 'bout what's been happenin'—up here?"

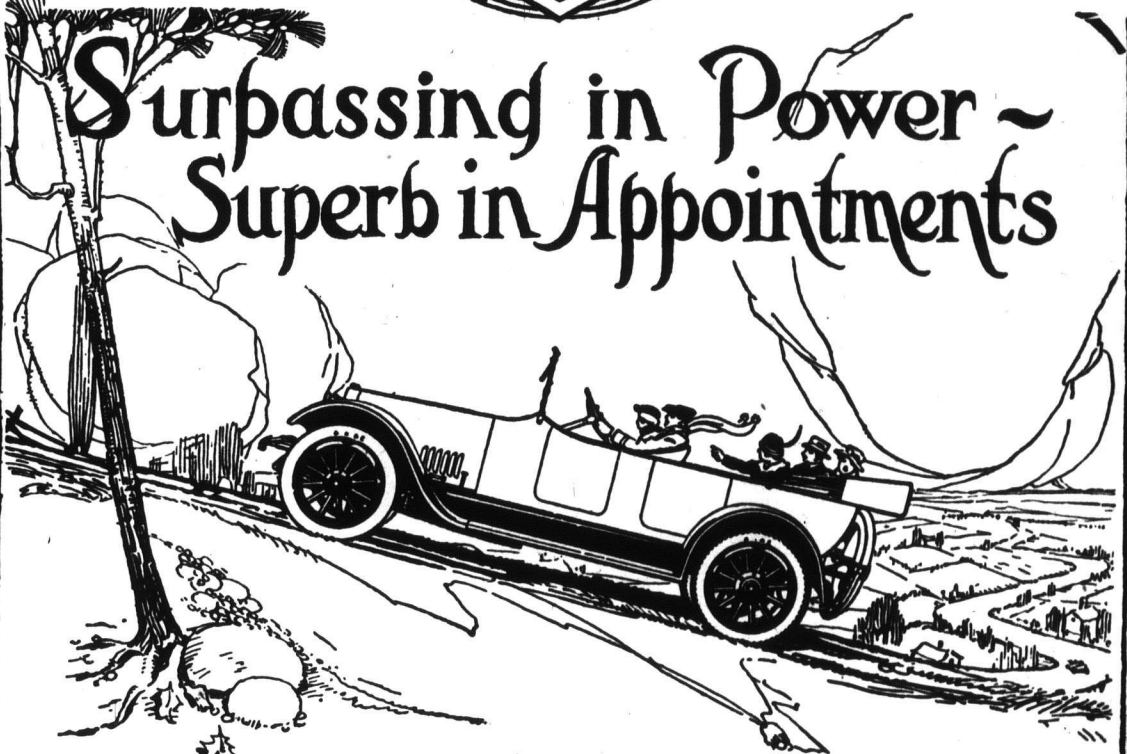
"Not a word. Is it anything concerns me—or Delfrio? I ain't seen a soul since I jumped off the midnight tonight. An' ain't I hungry! Why—what's Charley got the bracelets on fer?"

Rattlesnake Jack had just noticed his friend's wrists. Dodge, who had been such an interested listener during the newcomer's tale that he had forgotten all about his capture, now laughed, and leaning over the table freed Charley's hands. "Oh, this is quite a story, too," he said. "But I reckon we can postpone it for a while. It will have to be recounted together with yours to-morrow, anyway. Fall to on the canned corn, Mr. Rattlesnake, and I'll make a pot of fresh tea. Then we'll all be moving."

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