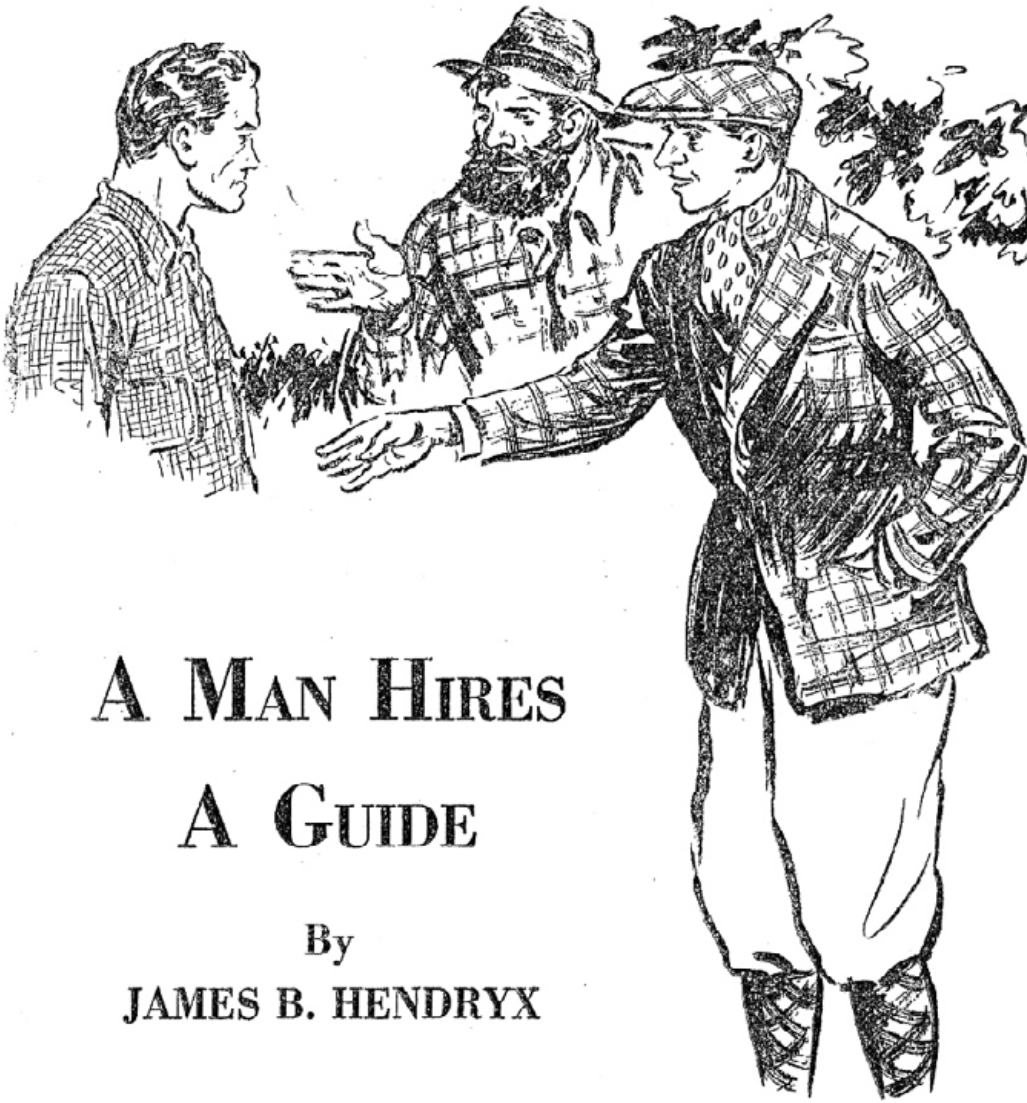


*"Certainly," Said Old Cush. "If a Man Ain't Dead,  
They Can't Hang No One for Killin' Him."*



## A MAN HIRES A GUIDE

By  
JAMES B. HENDRYX

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek hard against the Yukon-Alaska border, set out a bottle, two glasses, and inevitable leather dice box as Black John Smith crossed the floor and elevated a foot to the battered brass rail. Picking up the dice box, Black John peered into it, and waved it slowly back and forth in his hand,

as he eyed the other benignly across the bar. "I tell you, Cush, these long summer days shore warms the cockles of a man's heart. When I got up this mornin' an' saw the sun peepin' over the mountains, an' breathed in the air heavy with the scent of spruce, an' heard the bees buzzin' amongst the flowers, believe me, it done my soul good."

Cush nodded, his eyes on the dice box. "Yeah? Well, listen—I seen you peek in that box, an' I'm watchin' you waggle it

around. But I don't hear them dice clickin' none, an' it would do my soul more good to hear them dice rattle before you slide 'em out, than it would to see the sun peek over a mountain, or smell a spruce, or yet to hear no bee buzz amongst a flower."

The big man grinned. "Don't you ever contemplate the beauties of nature, Cush?"

"Oh, shore. But when you've got the dice box I got somethin' else to contemplate."

"You don't mean to insinuate, I hope, that I would seek an unfair advantage?"

"Listen, John—if we was shakin' fer a hundred ounces, er a thousan' ounces, I wouldn't even bother to watch you roll 'em out. But shakin' fer the drinks there ain't no ornery trick you know, er ever heard tell of, you wouldn't pull off if you could. But it ain't no use. So roll out them dice. I'm dry."

When the glasses were filled Cush glanced into the face of the big man. "An' speakin' of crooks, John, I wouldn't trust that there damn cuss that moved into Olson's old shack—him that calls hisself George W. Penrose—no further 'n what I could throw a bull by the tail."

"Has some act of his aroused your suspicion?"

"Jest lookin' at him anyone would know he's some kind of a crook. Look at them clothes he's rigged out in—long stockin's like wimmin wears, only his'n got black an' red an' yaller, an' green all wove into 'em, an' them baggy bisickle pants—when there ain't a bisickle within a thousan' mile of here. An' stickin' that there W in the middle of his name! What would anyone give a damn if it was W er P er Q? You don't see none of the other boys on the crick saltin' letters in the middle of their name—like Pot Gut W John, er Black H John. An' besides, he kin git off damn near as many big words as what you do. An' on top of all that he's packin' a roll of

bills that would choke a moose. An' you know damn well no guy like him could have got them bills honest."

Black John grinned. "I fear, Cush, that on the premises you've stated, your thesis is untenable. It is an incontrovertible fact that sartorial idiosyncrasies differ perceptibly, even as personalities differ."

"I got to git a new bar rag," Cush said, eyeing the cloth with which he was mopping the bar. "This un's about wore out."

The big man's grin broadened. "The observation, obviously practical as it may be, seems somehow irrelevant to the matter under discussion."

CUSH scowled across the bar. "Listen—you go ahead an' say all the big words you kin remember an' make up a lot of new ones, an' when you git 'em all said, I'll mebbe have the bar chores done, an' we'll shake fer another drink. An' in the meanwhile, you know jest as well as I do that this here George W. Penrose ain't nothin' but a tinhorn. So fer, he's had pretty good luck playin' stud—an' I'm givin' you fair warnin' that the first crooked move he makes in here, I'm goin' to bust him so hard with a bung starter that I'll knock that there W clean out through the back of his head."

"Takin' George by an' large, as the sayin' is, I'm inclined to agree that he ain't no beneficial addition to our community. An' admittin' that a crooked move in a card game would constitute an overt act of skullduggery, your use of the bung starter to correct such irregularity would ondoubtless be permissible."

"Whammin' some damn cuss over the head with a bung starter don't call fer no oration—even if I already done it," Cush growled. "An' besides this here George W. Penrose settlin' down on us, One Armed John claims they's a woman moved in on

Owl Crick. By God, if it ain't one thing, it's two! Every time some woman shows up on Halfaday there's hell to pay!"

Black John grinned. "We don't have to worry about her. She's old Job Benson's daughter. Ella May, her name is. You know Job relocated Jake Zilkie's claim over on Owl Crick after Jake got knocked off by that damn Zeke Towler. He left Ella May in Dawson to finish her schoolin' when he moved in last fall. An' this spring jest before the clean-up he went down an' fetched her up. I've known Ella May ever sence she was two year old—used to live down to Forty Mile, an' Beetles an' me, an' Camillo Bill used to carry her around in our packsacks. Then after Carmack made his strike, Job moved up to Dawson an' I'd see her on the street now an' then. Fine lookin' girl now—must be goin' on nineteen, twenty.

"It was me tipped Job off to the Zilkie claim. I'd ruther see a sourdough located on Owl Crick than some damn chechako. He'd ort to do well there, too. Zilkie took better than thirty thousan' out of that claim before he was murdered, an' it ain't nowheres near worked out."

"It's one thing if they're two—but if they're nineteen, twenty an' good lookin', to boot—it's somethin' else agin," Cush replied lugubriously, as he mopped a few drops of liquor from the bar. "What I claim, any woman kin raise hell with a crick."

The big man laughed. "You're a born woman-hater, Cush."

"Born—hell! I wish I had of be'n! What with four wives—an' plenty others that wasn't—I learnt to hate 'em the hard way! An' I'm tellin' you, John, it would be too bad if old Job Benson's gal should fall fer that damn tinhorn. He's got a smooth tongue in his head. An' he ain't so bad lookin'—in a barbershop sort of a way."

"She'll prob'ly get a chance to look him over one of these days," Black John

replied. "I run acrost old Job the other day when I was moose huntin', an' he said he had his dump about sluiced out an' he'd be over fer a game of stud an' some supplies in about a week. Ella May'll prob'ly come along with him. But she's a sourdough, Ella May is. She wouldn't fall fer no tinhorn chechako, no matter what he looked like, nor how smooth he talked. Accordin' to Job, she's kind of caked in on young Sam Evans, that's located on that gulch that runs into the White about a mile above the mouth of Halfaday. Sam's made the trip up to Owl Crick several times since Ella May got there. Job claims he's a likely enough young feller—fer a chechako. Sort of slow like—but a good steady worker. Got a good thing there in that gulch, too, accordin' to Job. He sort of favors the match."

"Wimmin ain't got no sense," Cush replied with stubborn conviction, and as his glance strayed past Black John, he nodded toward the open doorway. "Speak of the devil, as the Good Book says, an' up he pops. There comes Job now. The gal's along with him—an' so's that there Sam Evans."

**B**LACK JOHN'S voice boomed heartily as the three stepped into the room. "Belly right up to the bar, folks! The house is buyin' one. An' by gosh, if it ain't little Ella May! Seems like you get prettier an' prettier as time goes on. Remember how us boys used to carry you around in our packsacks down to Forty Mile?"

"Indeed I do!" the girl laughed. "I used to think you were the grandest men in the world."

"Hell—we was! We are yet, fer that matter. Job tells me he left you down to Dawson to finish your schoolin'. I s'pose by now you've learnt all there is to know."

"I'm just beginning to learn how terribly much I don't know—and never

will know," the girl smiled.

"There's hope for you yet, then," the big man announced, and was interrupted by Benson, who turned, glass in hand.

"Come on, fill up, John! Here's lookin' at you!"

Cush shoved the bottle over. "If a good lookin' woman shows up, John even fergits to drink." He glanced at the girl, hesitated, then reached to the back bar for another glass. "Would you jine us in a little snort, mam?" he asked. "It's on the house."

"No thank you," she smiled. "So Uncle John's a lady-killer, is he? Well, well!"

"Don't you believe a word that old coot says," the big man grinned, as he filled his glass.

"Sometime John's goin' to run acrost one he'll wisht to God he had killed the first minute he seen her," Cush replied forebodingly, and never cracked a smile as the others roared with laughter.

"Finish your clean-up, Job?" the big man asked, as the glasses were emptied and refilled.

"Yup. Finished her up yesterday. An' I'm shore obliged to you, John, fer tippin' me off to that location. It's about the best thing I've struck, yet."

"I figured it was good. An' it would have be'n too damn bad if some chechako had blundered onto it. What I claim, us sourdoughs has got to stick together." Passing up the second drink, young Evans turned from the bar, and out of the tail of his eye, Black John saw him and the girl slip unobtrusively from the room. He jerked a thumb toward the departing pair. "Figure they'll make a go of it?" he asked.

Old Job grinned. "Sometimes I do. An' then agin, sometimes I don't know. Looks to me like he's awful damn slow with his courtin'. Comes up to Owl Crick every Sunday, but he don't seem to know what to do when he gits there.

"He's got a good claim an' he's a good

stidy worker. Ella May ain't no damn fool. She's lived along the rivers all her life, an' she's took in the whole show. She's seen men go to hell by the whiskey route, an' others by gamblin'. She's seen rich men turned into bums, an' bums into rich men. An' she knows there's a happy mejium between 'em. She knows that the men who really count in this country ain't neither saints, nor sinners. Us sourdoughs we cut loose now an' then with our drinkin' and our card playin' an' mebbe whoop her up fer a day er two. But we don't do it too often—an' we do a hell of a lot of hard work in between.

"She shore as hell wouldn't want to hook up with no gamblin', whiskey-lushin', woman-chasin' high binder—nor yet she wouldn't want to saddle herself with no saint. She don't drink none, but she does like to go to dances, an' shows, an' have a good time, an' it ain't no more'n right that she should. This here Sam ain't no hellraiser. Usta sort of hang around Ella May back in Dawson last fall. He don't drink nothin' to speak of. Never' seen him hangin' around no wimmin, nor playin' cards. He come up last fall an' located on that gulch after I located on Owl Crick.

"Seems like all he wants to do is work his claim week days, an' come up an' set around lookin' at Ella May on Sundays. I don't know what the hell's holdin' him back. Anyone kin see he's crazy about her—jest the way he sets an' looks at her an' hangs on every word she says. If he had any sense he'd know she'd take him the minute he asked her—the way she plays up to him. But the damn fool don't ask her."

"Drink up, an' have another," Black John said. "Give him time, an' he'll get around to it, one of these days."

"Time—hell!" old Job retorted. "It was a damn sight different when I married my wife. Married her the first time I ever seen her. Yup—over on the Mackenzie, it was. I

was makin' a livin' along the river, prospectin', trappin', doin' a little fur tradin', an' what-not, an' her old man run a tradin' post at the mouth of the Arctic Red. I come along one day in a canoe, headin' north. Figgered I'd mebbe try my luck whalin' if I could connect up along the coast. But when I seen Angela I says 'to hell with whalin' —an' I up an' ask her to marry me."

Black John grinned. "Just like that, eh? Up an' asked her to marry you the minute you seen her?"

"Well—not the first minute. She was there on the bank mendin' a net when I come along. I drug my canoe out an' set there beside her. It's a hot day, an' we're settin' there in the sun on some empty fish boxes chawin' the fat, like young folks does, an' I figgered she's the prettiest gal I ever seen. So I asked her to marry me. She says she'd shore like to, but her old man's promised her to Sim Grayton, which he was the trader down to Good Hope, an' the orneriest old coot along the river.

"I asks her if she wants to marry him, an' she claims she'd ruther be dead. She says as long as her ma was alive things was all right—but she hadn't be'n dead more'n a month till the old man promised her to Grayton. I asks her why he would want to marry her off to a damn cuss like him an' she kinda shrugs an' says how Grayton's got plenty of money, an' she guesses the old man's practically sellin' her.

"The old man, he's slipped up behind the fish boxes, unbeknownst to us, an' he hears what she says. 'It's a damn lie!' he yells, an' orders her to go to the house. He tells me to mind my own business an' git to hell outa there. 'I'm takin' yer word fer it,' I says. 'I'm mindin' my business. An' my business right now is takin' Angela where Sim Grayton'll never lay a hand on her—an' we're both gettin' to hell outa here!'

"He reached fer an ice spud that was layin' there, but he didn't quite make it. I ketched him a sock on the jaw that rocked him back on his heels, an' then we went to it.

"He wasn't no easy meat in no man's language—bigger'n I was, an' hard as green ice. I wasn't by no means soft, myself, an' we fought fer damn near an hour—punchin', kickin', jabbin'. I know'd if he ever got them big arms around me an' got me down I was a goner, so I kep' out of his reach, dancin' around him an' punchin' every second—not darin' to give him a minute's rest to git his wind back.

"Finally he begin to slow up an' his punches wasn't landin' so hard. I was damn near winded myself, when I seen my chanct, an' stepped in an' planted a punch that landed jest under his ear. It must of damn near broke his neck the way his head popped sideways, an' his arms dropped, an' his knees sagged, an' he pitched forward onto his face, cuttin' his forehead on the corner of a fish box.

"He was plumb out, an' after seein' he was breathin' all right, Angela run to the house an' throw'd her stuff in a packsack, an' we throw'd it into my canoe an' shoved off, after smashin' the only two canoes the old man had. We hit back downriver, an' stopped at Norman an' got married by the priest, an' then hit up the Gravel, an' come on acrost the divide an' on down the Stewart to the Yukon."

The man paused and downed his drink. "I ain't never made no real strike," he added, after a pause, "but me an' Angela was always happy together, takin' the good with the bad—an' up to the time she died, two years ago come September, neither one of us ever regretted fer a minute what we'd done. Fill up. I'm buyin' a drink."

"Did the old man come to?" Cush asked, as he shoved the bottle along.

"Damn if I know," Job grinned. "If he didn't, he's be'n unconscious fer a hell of a while."

"Sech method ondoubtless has its advantages," Black John opined, "'bein', as you might say, abrupt rather than dilatory, or sedate. But on the other hand, where circumstances permits, I believe the consensus of opinion would favor a more protracted an' less abrupt courtship. Like I said, give Sam time, an' he'll pop the question."

Behind the bar Cush nodded lugubriously. "I ain't got no big words to git off, like John has—but like he says—give Evans rope enough, an' he'll hang hisself."

Black John grinned. "Cush regards matrimony as a snare an' a delusion."

"I don't know nothin' about no illusions," Cush growled, "but agin a man's be'n snared four times, he—" The words died on his lips, at the sound of a shot, and then another, and another. "What the hell's that?" he exclaimed.

**B**LACK JOHN turned and started for the door. Old Job halted him with a laugh. "Don't git excited," he said. "It ain't nothin' but Sam an' Ella May out there somewheres shootin' at a mark. He's got a little old thirty-two revolver an' his idee of a hell of a good time is to git Ella May out somewheres shootin' at tin cans, an' what-not. I figger if Sam don't make no better headway than what he has up to now, Ella May's liable to up an' marry someone else, jest to spite him."

A shadow darkened the doorway, and Black John regarded the newcomer with a grin.

"Well, well! If it ain't little Lord Fauntleroy himself! Step right up to the bar an' meet my old friend, Job Benson. Job, this dressy gent is George W. Penrose, a

newcomer amongst us, that's located down in Olson's old shack."

Penrose smiled as he joined the others at the bar, and filled the glass Cush slid toward him. "Glad to meet you, Benson. But as for being dressy—I wear this outfit for comfort, not for looks."

Old Job eyed the gaudy stockings and baggy knickerbockers. "I wouldn't take no comfort in a rig like that," he opined. "Be afraid of gittin' hung up by the seat of my pants on a stub. Throw that one into you. I'm buyin' a round."

One Armed John drifted in, and shortly thereafter Pot Guttled John and Red John joined the party. Several rounds of drinks were had, and old Job suggested a stud game. "Last time I was here you boys took me fer right around thirty ounces, an' now, by gravy, I aim to git it back, an' thirty more on top of it."

Black John grinned. "That seems like a laudable enterprise. What with One Armed John tendin' bar, we'll have a nice six-handed game. Fetch out the chips an' cards, Cush, an' we'll be gittin' at it. Job, he's shore entitled to his revenge."

The game had proceeded uneventfully for an hour when young Evans stepped into the room and ignoring the card game, crossed to the bar where One Armed John set out a bottle and glass. Glancing from beneath his hat brim from time to time, the big man noted that the liquor line on the bottle was lowering steadily. At the end of another hour Ella May paused for a moment in the doorway and, advancing to the table, stood beside her father's chair.

"Have you ordered the supplies yet, Daddy?" she asked.

Old Job lifted a corner of his hole card, glanced at the pip, and pushed it away. He looked up with a smile. "Cripes, no! I ain't give 'em 'a thought. Plenty time to git the supplies. We ain't pullin' out this evenin'.

I've got a job here that looks like it'll take all night to finish it."

The girl smiled. "I'll bet you have! Well—have a good time. But don't drink too much or you won't feel like hitting out tomorrow."

Cush shoved his hand into the discards and glanced up. "Go around to the kitchen an' tell the klooch I says to fry you up a nice thick moose steak. That quarter's hung jest long enough to be good. An' tell her to fix you up with a room fer the night. An' tell her I says after she's et, to fetch in a big hunk of that there cheese, an' four, five links of summer sausage, an' some mustard, an' couple loaves of bread an' set 'em there on the bar where we kin lunch off'n 'em."

Penrose pushed the last of his chips into the pot, and glanced across at Red John, who was eyeing the cards. "Raise you fifty," he said.

Red John hesitated a moment, and shoved five blue chips into the pot. "Call you."

Penrose laughed. "Your pair of nines win," he said. "I thought maybe my queen and jack would make you lay 'em down. Oh, well—it's all in a lifetime. Easy come, easy go, as the fellow says. Give me another stack, Cush." Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a huge roll of bills, and with a flourish, stripped off five one hundreds and shoved them across to Cush. He smiled across at Job, who was gathering the cards for the deal. "You might introduce me to your daughter," he said. "It isn't every day, or even every month, a man sees as pretty a girl as she is—especially around a dump like this."

"Why shore." Job slightly mellowed with liquor, smiled good naturedly. "Thought everyone along the crick know'd Ella May. Daughter, this here's Penrose W. Fauntleroy—er mebbe it's Fauntleroy W. Penrose—damn if I rec'lect which."

The other laughed. "George W. Penrose," he corrected. "The Fauntleroy part was just a pleasantry of Black John's—sort of kidding me about my clothes. I'll bet you don't see anything out of the way with them."

**A**CROSS the table Black John noted that the girl's eyes flashed for a split second on the young man who stood drinking alone at the bar. He noted also that the young man's lips tightened slightly at the corners, as he had listened to the words of the gambler. Then the eyes of the girl flashed on Penrose were dancing, and she laughed lightly.

"Of course, I don't! I'll bet Uncle John don't, either. He's just jealous—that's all. I'll bet if he knew where he could find it, he'd buy an outfit like that, right now!"

"An' wouldn't I be a sight for sore eyes, walkin' down Front Street—black beard, stockin's like a July sunset, an' the seat of my pants damn near draggin' the sidewalk! Cripes, if Downey'd see me he'd run me out of town!"

The girl laughed and turned toward the door. "I'm hungry as a bear. Guess I'll go and see about that big moose steak."

The game proceeded with one or another dropping out for a few minutes to visit the bar where the Indian woman had set out the cold lunch. Young Evans had quit the bar and seated himself in a chair at a window that looked out toward the landing. The sun hung low in the west, throwing long dark shadows of the surrounding spruce trees across the clearing. Through the doorway Black John caught a glimpse of Ella May walking slowly toward the creek bank. Penrose saw her, too, as he turned from the bar where he had been lunching on summer sausage and mustard. Instead of returning to the table, he strolled out and joined her, and together they made their way to the edge of the high

bank and seated themselves on a log that commanded a superb view of a long reach of the creek winding through the little valley. From where Black John sat the two were in plain sight; they were in plain sight, too, of the young man who sat alone at the window. From time to time, as the sound of light laughter floated on the still air, the big man's glance shifted to the silent figure in the chair. He noted that the eyes seemed riveted upon the two figures seated close together on the log, and that the lips were compressed into a thin straight line.

The sun went down. A pale half-moon brightened with the deepening dusk as the two rose from the log and, side by side, approached across the clearing. The girl passed around to the rear, and Penrose resumed his seat at the table.

Grimly, Black John noted, as the game proceeded, that Penrose was deliberately favoring old Job in the play. Several times when he suspected that the older man held good cards, Penrose deliberately boosted the pot until others dropped out; then, on Job's next bet, instead of calling or raising, folded his hand and tossed it into the discards, as the oldster raked in the pot.

It was three o'clock when the game broke up, and the men returned to their cabins. Job spread his blankets in the storeroom, and Black John stepped to the window where young Evans had fallen asleep in his chair, evidently the worse for his solitary drinking bout. Rousing the boy after much shaking, he smiled into the stupidly blinking eyes. "Better come along with me, son," he said. "I got an extry bunk in my cabin. 'Tain't only a few steps, an' you can roll in an' get a good night's sleep. A man can't get no proper rest slunched in a chair. Cripes, yer neck would be stiff as a board in the mornin', with yer head lolled over like it was."

The lad stared about him, his glance

centering on Cush, who was lowering the big swinging lamp over the bar. "Where's the rest of 'em?" he asked, passing a hand across his bewildered forehead.

"The game busted up an' they all hit fer their shacks. Cush, he's goin' to roll in—an' me, too. Come on. Cush is about to blow out the light."

"But—Job, and—and . . ."

"They're all right, son. Job, he's crawled in his blankets an' the klooch she looked after Ella May, like Cush told her. You'll see 'em in the mornin'."

## II

IT WAS late the following morning when Black John awoke. He cooked and ate his breakfast without waking the younger man who slept like a log despite the sounds of rattling stove lids and sizzling steak. Leaving him asleep, the big man strolled over to the saloon where Cush set out the bottle, dice box, and glasses. "Where's Job?" he asked.

"He's gone. Got his supplies an' pulled out an hour ago—him an' the girl. Claimed he's gittin' too old fer more'n one night's drinkin' an' card playin' in a row. He was feelin' good, barrin' a headache he claimed he had, on account he won back them thirty ounces we took him fer the last time he was here, an' ten ounces on top of 'em."

Black John picked up the dice box. "I've got a kind of a bad taste in my mouth myself, this mornin'. We'll make it one shake instead of horses fer the drinks. Beat them three sixes," he added, as he rolled the dice onto the bar.

Cush failed to beat the throw, and shoved the bottle across the bar. "Seems like Penrose played a kind a funny game, last night," he said. "He laid down to Job, two, three times, when I'd of bet my shirt he had him beat—an' one time when I know he had. I seen his discards. He tossed



away a pair of treys with a Trey in the hole, when the best Job could of had was a pair of kings, what without no pair showin'. Penrose played like a damn fool."

Black John nodded. "Yeah. Only he don't know it. He figured it was smart."

"Smart! What's so damn smart about tossin' away the winnin' hand an' lettin' someone else take the pot? Accordin' to that, the smarter a man is, the less he could win!"

"I didn't say it was smart. I said Penrose figured it was. He figured on playin' up to Job—sort of favorin' him, on account of the girl."

"Yeah, an' by God, didn't I tell you wimmin ain't got no sense? Cripes—her fallin' for a damn tinhorn like Penrose, when anyone with even the brains God give geese would know this here young Evans is worth a dozen of him!"

"You figure she fell for him, eh?"

"Fell fer him! 'Course she fell fer him. I take notice it was him she set out there on that log with all evenin'—not Evans. She fell fer him when she first seen him, there at the card table. She begun laughin' an' kiddin' with him, soon's old Job made 'em acquainted. Why she even stuck up fer that blamed monkey suit he wears—when he told her you'd be'n kiddin' him about it. An' young Evans standin' there at the bar throwin' whiskey into him he didn't want, an' eyein' her like a cow which had lost his calf."

"A cow loses *her* calf—not *his*," Black John grinned.

"Yeah? Well how about it if it was a bull calf that got lost? An' besides, if Evans was a cow, it would be his calf he was losin' an' not her him."

"Your reasonin' is entirely too abstruse for me to comprehend at this time of the mornin'. I'll ponder it at my leisure. But to return to the crux of the matter. Ella May Benson is a sourdough. She was born an'

raised right here in the Yukon. An' you bet, she knows her nuggets. You don't need to be afraid she'd ever fall for a guy like Penrose, even if he talked twict as slick, an' dressed twict as gaudy."

"I s'pose that there log-settin' in the moonlight ain't no sign she's fell fer him, eh? That on top of the way she throw'd them big blue eyes at him an' kidded with him there at the table?"



**B**LACK JOHN eyed the other speculatively. "Cush," he asked, "do you know the difference between strategy an' tactics?"

"No. An' what's more, I don't give a damn. Every time you git cornered, you reel off a lot of big words that no one don't know what they mean. I ain't never heard about no strategy, but every kid knows tick-tacks is a string with a rock tied on it you make a noise on winders with."

"I said tactics, not tick-tacks."

"I heard you, but I figgered, what with all the big words you git off, yer bound to git some of 'em hind side to. An' besides,

what's all that got to do with Penrose, an' the girl, an' this here young Evans?"

"If I can read the signs, it's got a hell of a lot to do with 'em. Listen, Cush—you heard what Job said about young Evans gain' up to Owl Crick every Sunday to see Ella May, an' then jest moonin' around, an' wastin' his time teachin' her to shoot at a mark with a pistol. An' likewise you heard him express the opinion that she'd take him the minute he asked her."

"Yeah, an' likewise I heard him say that if he don't hurry up an' ask her, she's liable to marry someone else, jest fer to spite him. Well, what I claim, this here damn Penrose is the one which she will marry. By God, a woman will do anything fer spite!"

"She ain't figurin' on marryin' Penrose," Black John insisted. "She's jest playin' up to him to make Evans jealous—to sort of spur him into poppin' the question. She saw Evans standin' there by the bar when she came in, an' listenin', when she was kiddin' with Penrose, an' likewise after supper, she knew he was sittin' there at the window when she walked acrost the clearin'. She prob'ly figured he'd be the one to go out an' set there watchin' the sunset with her—but when Penrose went out instead, she grabbed the chanct to use him to make her play for Evans. It's like I said—about strategy an' tactics. Strategy is layin' out a campaign in its broader aspects, to accomplish a purpose—in this case Ella May's purpose is to marry young Evans. Tactics is the means used to accomplish the purpose—like her playin' up to Penrose in order to jolt Evans into askin' her to marry him."

"Huh," Cush grunted. "If she's so hellbent on marryin' him, why don't she come right out an' tell him so, an' then go hunt up a preacher er a jestice an' git married?"

"Well, cripes, Cush—a girl likes the courtin' to be the other way around. She can't just up an' tell a man she wants to marry him."

"The hell an' she can't! My second wife didn't wait fer me to do no courtin', an' she didn't fool around with none of them there tactics an' stratums, neither! I went acrost the river to Covington one night, an' got a little tight, an', when we woke up next mornin' she claimed we'd got married. Hell, I didn' rec'lect even seein' her before! But she was a good looker, so I took her word fer it."

"Cripes! Didn't you check up on it?"

"No. You see, we got up kinda late, that mornin', and I was due to go on shift at eleven o'clock where I was tendin' bar over in Cincinnati, so we had to hustle. I showed her where my room was over the saloon, an' she moved in. I figgered on gittin' the papers on it when I got time. But it's jest one of them things a man keeps puttin' off, an' bein' as I didn't git over to Covington very often, I never got around to it. Didn't make no difference, nohow—hell, we hadn't lived together more'n six months er so, till she skipped out with a B. and O. conductor."

YOUNG Evans paused for a moment in the doorway, glanced about the room, and crossed to the bar. "Where's Job?" he asked.

"They pulled out—him an' the girl," Cush replied, as he slid a glass across the bar and shoved the bottle over. "Have one on the house."

Evans eyed the bottle and retched. "I couldn't take a drink of that damn stuff this morning if I was to be shot for passin' it up! Had too much of it last night, I guess. Even the sight of it makes me sick." Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a paper and tossed it onto the bar. "There's my list of supplies," he said. "When you

get 'em put up, I'll be pulling out, too."

Cush glanced at the paper and handed it back. "Someone's comin'," he said. "I hear a noise down to the landin' an' I'll be busy fer a while in here. You go on in the storeroom an' help yerself. The stuff's in there on the shelves. Lay it in a pile on the floor, an' when yer through I'll check it over."

As the young man disappeared through the storeroom door, Cush glanced toward the clearing. "Here comes that damn Penrose agin," he said, in a tone meant to carry to the storeroom. "Prob'ly come back to make another play fer old Job's girl."

Penrose stepped to the bar and ranged himself beside Black John. "How's everyone this morning?" he asked, smiling into the faces of the two. Drawing a roll of bills from his pocket, he stripped one off and tossed it onto the bar. "Let's have a little snort. You boys put a nick in my roll, last night—but I can still buy a drink." He paused and glanced about the room. "I suppose old Job's still asleep, eh?"

"No. He got his stuff an' pulled out early."

"Pulled out!" There was a note of disappointment in the tone. "And—Ella May? I suppose she went with him?"

Cush nodded. "Yeah, she went along."

As the drinks were poured, a slight sound drew Black John's glance to the "peekhole," a narrow slot in the partition wall placed just beneath a shelf in a manner that rendered it invisible to anyone in the saloon who did not know of its existence, yet gave a perfect view of the entire barroom. He noted that a pair of eyes were glued to the slot.

"Damn good looker—Ella May," Penrose said, with a wink at Black John, as he filled his glass.

The big man nodded. "Yeah—she ain't so hard to look at."

"Plenty lively, too. Boy, those eyes of hers would get any man going—the way she can shoot 'em around! That's the way I like 'em—full of pep and vinegar. Told me she lives over on Owl Crick—wherever that is."

"Yeah. Job's workin' a location over there."

"Far from here, is it?"

"Well, it ain't so far in miles acrost country. A man would have to know the trail, though. There's a couple of swamps to get through. It's further by canoe—down Halfaday an' up the White, an' then a piece up Owl Crick."

Penrose was silent for a moment. "This Owl Crick?" he asked. "There must be lots of cricks running into the White. How would a man know when he got there, in case he went by canoe?"

"He wouldn't. The Government ain't got around to puttin' up sign posts yet. If a man had a guide that knows the country he wouldn't have no trouble. Figurin' on goin' over there?"

"You're damned right I'm goin' over there! You don't catch me passing up a jane like her. You don't run across that kind every day. I'm going over there and make my play fer her."

"Figure on marryin' her, eh?"

"Marrying her! Hell, no! You don't have to marry 'em to get 'em—if you know your stuff. Give me a couple of more evenings with her and I'll have her eating out of my hand."

"Figure on fetchin' her down to Olson's shack?"

"Hell, no! There's no profit in that. I'll take her straight through to Dawson. Cuter Malone will have to pay through the nose for her."

Black John nodded. "But how about Job? He might not like her goin' off with you like that."

Penrose gave a contemptuous snort. "What—that old hick! Hell, I'll take liquor enough up there to get him oiled, and leave enough there to keep him oiled, and he won't know she's gone for a week. About a guide, now? He'd have to be someone that could keep his eyes and ears shut—and know enough to forget he'd even made the trip. I'll pay damn good money for the right man. Know anyone that would fill the bill?"

Black John pondered the question for several moments. "Yeah, there's a young fella that knows that Owl Crick country like a book. Name's Evans—Sam Evans. Kinda slow like, Sam is—sometimes too damn slow for his own good—'specially with women. Mebbe you noticed him last evenin'. He come in while we was playin' cards, an' histed a few drinks, here at the bar."

Penrose nodded. "Yes, I believe I did notice him. Didn't pay any attention to him, though. You think he'd be okay?"

"I can't think of no one I'd rather recommend fer that particular trip," Black John replied. "He don't never go around soundin' off his bazoo, an' he can be depended on to do the right thing."

"That suits me to a dot. Where can I find him?"

Black John smiled. "You won't have to go far. He's back in the storeroom right now, gettin' his supplies together. You got here just in time, too. Sam, he figured on pullin' out pretty quick. He's got a location of his own, somewheres over on the White." Stepping to the storeroom door, Black John raised his voice. "Sam! Hey, Sam! You in there!"

"Yeah—I'm here!"

"Come on out. There's a fella out here wants to hire a guide. He'll pay damn good money, he claims. Wants to make a trip over to Owl Crick. I told him you know'd that country." He returned to the bar, and as

Evans came toward him he noted that the young man's face seemed a shade paler than usual, that his eyes had narrowed to slits, and that his lips were pressed into a thin white line. "Sam," he said, "this is George W. Penrose."

Penrose smiled into the granite-like face of the younger man. "Glad to know you, Sam," he said. "I've got a little job of guiding for you. It won't take but a few days. I want to go up to Owl Crick. May hang around there a day or two—then back to the river. Won't need you for the trip down the White. An ounce a day is going wages for guides. I'll pay you four ounces a day. Black John tells me you can be depended on to do the right thing—to forget whatever you see and hear—forget that you ever made the trip, even. Is that right?"

THE narrowed eyes met the other's glance squarely. "I'll do the right thing, all right. I can't promise to forget I made the trip. But I can promise not to go shootin' off my mouth about what happens. You can depend on that."

"That's good enough for me," Penrose said. "I'm camping in Olson's old shack, down the crick. We can drop down and spend the night there, and hit out for Owl Crick in the morning. You can bring your supplies along and leave them there till the trip's over and then pick 'em up. That will save you doubling back up here for them."

The other nodded. "Okay. I'll be ready pretty quick."

An hour later, after the two had departed, Cush shoved the bottle across to Black John. "Say," he breathed, "did you see them eyes of his'n—an' how white his face was an' his mouth pressed thin as a crack in a glass? A man would think he'd stud here an' heard every word Penrose said—about old Job's girl."

The big man nodded. "He heard it, all

right—every damn word of it. I could see his eyes, there at the peek-hole. I believe he can be trusted to do the right thing.”

Cush tossed off his drink and refilled his glass. “I need another,” he said. “By God, a man feels like worshin’ out his mouth jest standin’ here an’ listenin’ to a damn cuss like him talk about that girl the way he done. I’d ort to of split his head with the bung starter! I shore hope young Evans didn’t waste all the shells fer that there pistol of his’n shootin’ at a mark.”

Black John grinned. “You don’t mean to say you’d condone a shootin’ on Halfaday?”

“What I claim Evans ort to be hung if he *don’t* shoot him—the way he talked about sellin’ his girl to Cuter Malone!”

“An’ if he does, the boys might call a miner’s meetin’ an’ hang him.”

“Like hell they’ll hang him! Jest let ‘em try it! By God, I’m the coroner around here, an’ they can’t hang no one fer killin’ no one that I don’t claim is dead. We’d have to hold an inquest. An’ I wouldn’t say that damn Penrose was dead if he was shot through the heart, an’ his head was smashed in with a club, an’ he was drowned in the crick, to boot! An’ if a man ain’t dead they can’t hang no one fer killin’ him!”

Black John grinned broadly. “Anyhow, we don’t have to cross no bridges till we get to ‘em. From here, the arrangement seems eminently satisfactory.”

### III

**I**T WAS nearly noon the next day when One Armed John, chest heaving, and eyes fairly bulging from their sockets, burst into the saloon where Cush and Black John were shaking dice for the drinks. “Down to Olson’s old shack!” he managed to gasp, between breaths, “Downey—he’s in there—sawin’ his head off!”

Black John paused, dice box in hand, and regarded the man with a frown. “You full of hooch?” he asked.

“I ain’t had a drink sence yesterday! He’s in there, I tell you! I seen him! He’s sawin’ it off with a meat saw—right clost above the eyes.” Cush scowled across the bar. “Why would Downey be sawin’ his head off?” he asked.

“Not *his* head! Penrose’s!”

“Oh,” Cush shifted his glance to Black John. “You ain’t beat them three fives yet,” he said. “Well, Penrose needed killin’ it anyone ever did. But it looks like a kinda clumsy way of killin’ a man, at that.”

“I figger Penrose was dead a’ready,” One Armed John explained. “I was fishin’ down there, an’ I come around the bend an’ seen another canoe pulled up beside Penrose’s, so I snuck up an’ peeked through the winder, an’ damn if there wasn’t Downey down on his knees on the floor sawin’ away on Penrose’s head, an’ Penrose was jest layin’ still an’ not squirmen’ around none, like anyone would if someone was sawin’ their head—so I figger he must of be’n dead.”

“Your reasonin’ seems logical,” Black John admitted, and cast the dice. “There’s three sixes to beat your fives, Cush. I’m throwin’ this drink into me, an’ headin’ for the hills to see if I can get me a moose. I just happened to think, my meat’s runnin’ low. If Downey shows up, tell him I’ll be back sometime this evenin’. An’ if he goes to askin’ any questions, you don’t know the answers to none of ‘em—see?”

Black John crossed the creek, and ascending to the rim, struck across country for the gulch in which Evans had located his claim. He arrived at the shack just as the young man was swinging a well-filled packsack into his canoe.

“Hello, Sam!” he greeted. “Goin’ someplace?” Without waiting for a reply, he continued. “One Armed John come into

Cush's a while back. He'd be'n fishin' down the crick. Claimed he run acrost Corporal Downey down to Penrose's shack."

The younger man shrugged. "I killed him," he said in a dull voice. "I'm glad I did. I'll take what's coming to me."

The big man smiled. "What's comin' to you hadn't ort to be so hard to take, son—if you work it right."

"What do you mean? I killed Penrose. And the police will call it murder, I guess. And maybe it is. But he had it coming. Anyway, it saved Ella May—and maybe a lot of other girls, too. I heard what he said, back there in Cush's yesterday. But that wasn't a patch on what he told me after we'd got down there. Do you know what his business was? It was selling women— young girls, mostly, to places like Cuter Malone's Klondike Palace. I didn't know there were any such rotten, low-lived men living as Penrose. And he sat there after we'd had supper, last night, and bragged about it. Told about how he'd operated in New Orleans, and San Francisco, and Seattle—how he'd hang around dance halls, and take girls out and get 'em drunk and—well—you can guess the rest. And he said when the law got to crowding him too close he came up here. The more he talked, the more I hated him, and then when he started in on Ella May—what he was going to do, and all—something seemed to blow up inside my head, and I jerked my pistol out of my pocket. He saw me do it, and grabbed up the iron poker, and I fired, and he dropped there on the floor. I don't think I even took aim. But the bullet caught him right between the eyes. He fell, and the blood ran down the floor in a slow red stream.

"I never wanted to kill anyone before. But I wanted to kill him—for what he said about—about Ella May—and those other girls, too. He didn't even know that I knew

Ella May, I guess, or he wouldn't have told me those things. But—I love Ella May. I wanted to marry her and bring her here to live—just us two. I wanted to tell her I loved her—and every Sunday when I'd go up there, I'd make up my mind to do it. But when I'd get there, I'd think—what if she'd say 'no'—or laugh at me—or, maybe get mad. So I never asked her. But I was always going to—sometime. Then when I heard what Penrose said, back there in the saloon, I hired out to him. I didn't figure to kill him—but I made up my mind to take him way back in the hills and then slip away and leave him there, and maybe be couldn't find his way back."

Black John listened in silence, and when the other ceased speaking, he nodded toward the packsack in the canoe. "And where were you hittin' for, now?"

"Why—I—I was pulling out. I've heard of the Dalton Trail and I figured if I could find it maybe I could get away. I've heard how you hang men on Halfaday for murder."

"We hang 'em for killin' men, son—not for killin' skunks."

"But—the police? You said Corporal Downey was at Penrose's shack? The law will call it murder."

"Yeah, the law might, at that."

A ray of hope gleamed in the young man's eyes. "If you don't believe it was a crime—killing a man like that—maybe you could tell me how to find the Dalton Trail. Maybe if I start now, I could get outside before Corporal Downey could catch me."

"How about Ella May?"

The other shook his head, slowly: "I—I guess Ella May will always be—just a dream—now."

Black John frowned. "I'll tell you about a trail—but not the Dalton Trail. It's a trail that will take you to a Siwash village up the White, an' back off the river. Father Cassatt's got a mission there. He's a fine

man. When you get to Owl Crick, you stop in there an' pick up Ella May, an' take her on up with you. Father Cassatt will marry you. Then you two can come back an' work your claim here."

"But—Corporal Downey? The law—?"

"Leave Downey an' the law to me."

"But—Ella May! I—I've never even asked her to marry me. Maybe she'll think I'm a fool."

"She knows damn well you are, an' so do all the rest of us—for not askin' her a long time ago!"

"But—I'll have to tell her I shot Penrose, and—"

"Yeah—an' when you tell her what you know about him, she'll say it was the best shot you ever made! An' if she's got any doubts about what kind of a skunk he was, jest send her to me. Get goin' now. But first, you better let me have your pistol an' all the shells you've got for it. Don't leave any thirty-two shells layin' around. An' if Downey shows up an' starts askin' questions—don't tell him a damn thing. Don't even admit you ever seen Penrose, or even heard tell of him. Keep mum. Don't tell him nothin' about nothin'. He can't convict you, even if he tries, if he can't find the gun, an' you don't shoot off your mouth. If he asks you if you own a thirty-two tell him 'no.' It'll be my gun when you hand it over to me. Get me the gun an' the shells, an' get goin'. I'm hittin' back to Cush's."

#### IV

**D**ARKNESS had settled over the little valley of Halfaday when the big man stepped into the saloon to find Corporal Downey standing at the bar talking with Cush.

"Did you get your moose?" the officer asked.

"Hell, no! Never even seen one. Not

even a track. Must all be in the high hills on account of the flies. I s'pose you're on the trail of some sinner—did you get your man?"

Downey nodded. "Yeah. I got him, all right. But he was dead when I got him."

"Dead, eh? Fill up. I'll buy one. What seemed to be his trouble?"

"His trouble," Downey answered, "was a bullet that caught him right square between the eyes. I got the bullet—a thirty-two. Do you know anyone who owns a thirty-two pistol or revolver?"

"Cripes sake, Downey—no one on Halfaday would own a damn pop-gun like that!"

"How about you, Cush? Do you know of any thirty-two on the crick?"

Cush shook his head. "I ain't saw no thirty-two sence I was a kid."

"So someone saved the law a hangin', eh?" Black John asked. "Who was it got shot?"

"A guy with a string of aliases. Goes by the name of George W. Penrose, now. The law couldn't have hung him—though God knows he deserved it. We wanted him on a trafficking in women charge. We got a lot of dope on him from the American police—an' believe me, it ain't pretty readin'. He brought three girls in with him, an' turned 'em over to Cuter Malone. One of 'em's agreed to testify against him. So we'd have had a case, all right."

Black John nodded. "Yeah, you'd have had a case—if the girl didn't change her mind. An' if you'd got a conviction—which it's no cinch you would—Penrose might have got a couple of years in the pen, an' then be'n turned loose to go to work agin."

"That's right," Downey admitted. "He'd deserved to git a couple of hundred years, accordin' to that dope. It's about the worst I ever run acrost."

Black John grinned. "Well then,

Downey—it would look like his present status is satisfactory, all around.”

DOWNNEY frowned. “I won’t deny that it’s a good thing he’s dead. An’ personally, I’m glad he is. But after all, John—murder’s murder. The law don’t take no account of the murdered man’s past record. Accordin’ to the law, it’s as much a crime to murder Penrose, as it would be to murder Father Cassatt.”

“Honest now, Downey—jest between us three—sometimes don’t the law make you laugh?”

“There’s plenty of times when I wished it gave us more latitude than what it does,” the officer replied. “But with the law as it stands, I’ve got to try to locate the man that shot Penrose. I want to find out why he done it. I thought, of course, the motive was robbery—but cripes, he had a roll of big bills on him that would choke a horse. But there must have be’n some motive. A man don’t commit a murder just for fun. I saw Pot Guttled John as I came up the crick, an’ he told me he saw a young fellow by the name of Sam Evans goin’ down the crick yesterday in a canoe with Penrose. Do you know this Evans?”

“Shore I know him. Good, steady goin’ lad. Workin’ a location over on a gulch just above the mouth of Halfaday. He was here yesterday. Come in the day before along with old Job Benson an’ Ella May. He’s nuts about Ella May. Figures on marryin’ her, if he ever gets the guts to tell her about it. An’ she wants it that way, too, accordin’ to Job. Fine girl—Ella May.”

Downey nodded. “You bet she is! I remember when she was a little kid, down on Forty Mile. She finished up her schoolin’ last winter in Dawson. They say she’s about the smartest student they ever had.”

Black John nodded. “Job an’ Ella May pulled out yesterday mornin’ for Owl

Crick. Young Evans, he slept late, an’ when he got up he come over here to get his supplies, an’ Cush bein’ busy, he told him to go in the storeroom an’ dig the stuff out. Whilst he was in there, Penrose come in. We’d had a stud game the night before, an’ Ella May looked on fer a few minutes, an’ Penrose got to kiddin’ with her. Then after supper, he saw her walkin’ acrost the clearin’, so he dropped out of the game an’ went out, an’ they set on that log out there on the edge of the bank, an’ when it come dark, Ella May went inside an’ Penrose got back in the game.

“Like I said, he come in here yesterday mornin’ whilst Evans was in the storeroom, an’ figurin’, I s’pose that me an’ Cush didn’t give a damn what a man done, he started in to tell us how he was goin’ to go up to Owl Crick, an’ get old Job drunk, an’ slip Ella May down to Dawson—claimed, Cuter would have to pay through the nose fer her. Of course, he’d never got away with it. But he’d have tried. He wanted to know where he could get a guide to take him to Owl Crick.

“Standin’ right here, I could see a pair of eyes there at the peek-hole, an’ mistrustin’ they might be Sam’s, an’ knowin’ he was listenin’ to what Penrose was sayin’, I told Penrose I knew a young fellow that could guide him to Owl Crick, an’ I hollered to Sam, an’ he come out, an’ took the job. Then a little while later, they pulled out.” Corporal Downey remained silent for several moments, while Black John refilled his glass. He glanced at the Corporal. “Do you still want to call it a murder?” he asked.

Downey shook his head. “I don’t want to, John. You know that. But it ain’t what I want that counts. It’s what the law says. The law would have dealt with Penrose.”

“He’s be’n dealt with,” Black John said dryly. “An’ it ain’t no misdeal, like the law would have made, either.”



"I'll admit he got what was comin' to him," Downey replied. "But jest the same I've got to go over to that gulch an' see what I can find. I've got a moon. I'll drop down to Olson's old shack an' hole up there tonight. Then in the mornin' I'll bury Penrose, an' go on over to Evans'."

Cush and Black John accompanied the officer to the landing and stood on the bank as he shoved his canoe into the water. As he was about to step into it, he turned and faced the two. "Of course," he said, "I'll have to have evidence. If I can't find a thirty-two gun around his place, an' if he should refuse to talk—I wouldn't even arrest him, because I know I'd never get a conviction—especially if you boys was to

go on the stand an' tell the jury what you've jest told me."

Black John grinned. "Every once in a while the law does work out some sort of justice, don't it, Downey? Even if it is a sort of left-handed justice. Well, so long. Good luck to you!"

As the officer disappeared around a bend a few minutes later old Cush glanced into the big man's face, "Some damn fool jury might convict him, no matter what we told 'em," he said. "I shore hope to hell he don't find that gun."

Black John grinned, drew the thirty-two pistol from his pocket and tossed it into the creek. "He ain't apt to," he said. "Come on—I'll shake you for a drink."