

**"Saying That Your Name Is John Smith Is an Error
That Can Be Rectified"**



BLACK JOHN INVOKES THE GODS

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I

OLD CUSH folded the month-old newspaper and laid it on the back-bar, as Black John Smith crossed the floor and elevated his foot to the battered brass before the bar of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little band of outlawed men that had grown up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border. "It beats hell," he said,

"how Siwashes gits pushed around."

"What do you mean—pushed around?" the big man asked, picking up the leather dice box and rolling three aces onto the bar.

Cush picked up the dice, returned them to the box, and shook three treys. "Horse on me," he admitted, and after casting the dice three times and only getting three deuces, put the box on the back bar, and set out a bottle and two glasses. "I'll buy the drinks. Makin' a man beat three deuces

in three would be jest a waste of time.”

Black John grinned. “What use are you goin’ to put this here time to that we’ve saved?” he asked, as he filled his glass and shoved the bottle toward the other.

“Well, hell—a man had ort to save time whenever he kin,” Cush said. “Cripes, that’s what all these things were invented fer—steamboats, an’ railroads, an’ the like of that.”

“It shore as hell ain’t what dice was invented fer,” the big man replied. “But what was yer observation anent the mobility of Siwashes referrin’ to?”

“If you’d saved all the time you’ve wasted sayin’ big words instead of little ones, you wouldn’t be no more’n ten-year-old, right now,” Cush replied sourly. “But take it like this here piece in the paper tells about—they are openin’ up some reservation fer settlement in Dakoty er Montana; er one of them states, an’ movin’ the Siwashes to some other reservation further on. How the hell kin they do that? Don’t them Siwashes own them reservations, er somethin’?”

“Oh shore, they own’ em. It says so, right in the treaty. This land is theirs to have an’ to hold in fee simple till the mind of man runneth not to the contrary, er till water runneth up hill, er till hell freezeth over—er some sech legal wordin’!”

“Well, then how the hell kin they move ‘em off’n there?”

“It’s accomplished by the simple device of tearin’ up the treaty.”

“But—take it like this here saloon. I’ve got a Gov’mint grant fer the land it sets on—an’ if anyone come along an’ tried to move me off’n it, I’d clout him over the head with a bung starter quicker’n a cat could lick her whiskers.”

“But you’ve got to remember, Cush, damn few Siwashes carries bung starters.”

“They’ve got guns.”

“The Government’s got more guns. The Siwashes found that out a hell of a while ago. It’s a lesson they started learnin’ damn near three hundred years ago, when them old Puritans an’ Pilgrims come acrost the ocean to get shet of religious oppression.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I never give the matter no more’n what you’d call passin’ notice when I read it in the hist’ry books, so there might be some abstruse theological p’int I missed. But as I rec’lect it there was several schools of thought back there in England an’ on the continent regardin’ the proper road to salvation—one faction holdin’ out fer sprinklin’, an’ another fer dunkin’, an’ a third fer purgatory, an’ a fourth fer instant damnation. All designed primarily to prevent folks from enjoyin’ the primrose path to hell. Sech was the fervor of the adherents to these momentous propositions that they backed up their idees with jailin’s, beheadin’s, burnin’s an’ torturin’s. Well, after standin’ about so much of it, these here Pilgrims an’ Puritans decided it wasn’t no place fer underprivileged minorities, so they sailed acrost the ocean an’ landed there in New England where they could be free to worship God in their own way, accordin’ to the dictates of their conscience—an’ which they done by shootin’ all the Siwashes they seen, stealin’ their land, an’ buildin’ churches on it in which to praise God for their deliverance.”

“Was these folks s’posed to be Christians?”

“Hell—yes!”

“Huh.”

“Yeah—that’s the way I figger it. An’ ever sence them days the Siwashes has be’n gittin’ either killed off, er shoved on as the Government deemed it needed their land.”

"Kinda seems like it ain't right, somehow. But hell, John, you got to remember them Siwashes had a hell of a lot more land than they could ever use."

BLACK JOHN grinned. "Yeah, that's the theory the Government goes on. But it's a damn good thing fer some folks that the theory applies only to Siwashes."

A shadow darkened the doorway, and a man stepped into the room, ranged himself beside Black John at the bar, and swung a heavy pack-sack to the floor. "Is this here Cushing's Fort on Halfaday Crick?" he asked.

"That's right," Cush admitted, sliding a glass across the bar. "Fill up. The house is buyin' one."

The stranger filled his glass, and as he returned the bottle to the bar, his eyes swept the room. "I'm glad I got here," he said. "It's a hell of a ways, ain't it?"

"Well, that's accordin' to where a man started from," Black John replied.

"I come from Link Crick."

"Never heard of it."

"Lot's of folks ain't, I guess. But it's there, all right. Old man Mason named it on account, when he first prospected it, he seen a link there. My name's John Smith. I got—"

"You've got to think up a better name than that—er at least a different one," the big man interrupted.

"What d'you mean?"

"Meanin' that the one you mentioned has become hackneyed hereabouts. Every damn miscreant that hits the crick claims his name is John Smith. It was all right till there got to be too damn many of us fer the parts we've got. Then me an' Cush invented the name can."

The man's brow drew into a puzzled frown. "What do you mean—fer the parts you've got? An' what the hell's a name can?"

"Well, a man ain't got only so many distinguishin' characteristics—like bein' one-armed, or pot-gutted, er long-nosed, er one-eyed, er long, er short, or red-headed, er black-whiskered. So when we'd used up all them idiosyncrasies we hauled out an old hist'ry book that Cush had, an' scrambled us up a batch of synthetic names which we placed in that there molasses can on the end of the bar. So now when someone comes along an' taxes our credulity with the name John Smith, we invite him to draw another one out of the can—the name he draws becomin' his own personal property until sech time as we retrieve it from the corpse, an' toss it back in the can fer the next lucky pseudo argonot."

"Wow!" exclaimed the man. "I don't a know what half them words mean but—"

"Neither does John," Cush interrupted. "He jest says 'em."

"But," continued the stranger, "I figger you mean that you don't want no more John Smiths on the crick. It took me quite a while to figger out that name—but I guess it ain't no use. So I'll draw me some other one." Reaching into the can, the man withdrew a slip and held it to the light. "Stonewall Grant," he pronounced. "Okay—then I'm him."

"It's got a good solid sound to it," the big man observed. "An' now, Stonewall, as a matter of introduction, I'll tell you that I'm known hereabouts as Black John Smith, an' the party behind the bar is Lyme Cushing, better known as Cush."

The man raised his glass. "Here's how," he said. When the empty glasses had been returned to the bar, he motioned toward the bottle. "Fill up, boys. I'm buyin' one. I've heard about you fellas up here—an' how the police don't dast to show up on the crick. That's why I come."

"Quite a few others has wafted themselves hither, as a poet would say, on

the same misinformation. But most of 'em didn't have no luck at it."

"Talkin' about luck," Stonewall said, "it seems like there ain't no jestice. Accordin' to what the Good Book claims, all men is born free an' equal. An' if that's the case, it looks like everyone ort to have the same amount of luck. But that ain't the way it works out." He paused and eyed the others for an expression of corroboration.

"There's ondoubtless certain factors that enters into a man's cosmos, other than the accident of birth," Black John opined, "an' sech factors might have a bearin' on his luck."

"Yeah," the man agreed, a bit vaguely. "That's prob'ly the way of it. But take me, now. I ain't never worked in no factory, but neither I ain't never had no luck. It runs clean back to my gran'pa."

"Sort of a family trait, eh?"

"Yeah, an' my pa was jest like him. Gran'pa, he went out to Californy in forty-nine. He wouldn't fool around no cricks—claimed the gold was in the mountains, an' if a man found the mother lode, he'd be rich. So he stuck to the rocks, an' pecked an' blasted at 'em fer goin' on thirty year."

"Did he find the mother lode?" Cush asked.

"No. That's what I'm tellin' you—he didn't have no luck. So then pa, he moved over to Montany, an' done the same way fer twenty year more. But he didn't have none, neither. An' when I heard tell of this here Klondike, I come up here last year, an' I be'n workin' a rock claim up on the head of a crick I named Rock Crick, on account they was rocks there."

"Sort of carryin' on the family tradition, eh?"

"No, I didn't fetch nothin' along but jest what I needed. But I rec'lected what gran'pa says to pa the night he died. 'Don't be a damn fool an' rut around in the sand an' gravel like a hog,' he says.

'Stick to the rocks, like I done.' An' when I started fer here, pa, he tells me about the same thing. 'To hell with the cricks,' he says. 'Go after the gold in the rocks—right where she starts!' So that's what I done."

"Make good at it?" Black John asked, with a glance toward the pack-sack at the man's feet.

"No. That's what I be'n tellin' you. I ain't had no luck. The gold's there—right in them rocks on my claim—but I ain't got to it yet. I would of be'n into it 'fore snow flies, if it hadn't be'n for old man Mason."

"Thought you said Mason was on Lynx Crick—an' that you come from there? Now you claim it's Rock Crick."

"Yeah, Rock Crick runs into Link Crick—jest a kind of a feeder."

"An' old man Mason run you off?"

"No. He got murdered. Yup, he got shot, an' his cache got robbed of seventeen hundred ounces. An' the hell of it is, I was claimed to have be'n saw right clost to his cabin the day before they found his corpse. An' on top of that it was further claimed that a couple of shots was heard up there that day."

"An' I s'pose you wasn't even on this Lynx Crick, that day, eh?"

"Oh, shore. I was on the crick, all right."

"Anywheres near Mason's cabin?"

"Yeah, pretty clost to there. But they lied like hell when they claimed I fired two shots. It was only one."

"Got him the first time, eh?"

"No, I missed him. An' that was some more bad luck. He was standin' there on the back of the crick lookin' around kinda oneasy like—like he heard somethin' an' was tryin' to locate it. I draw'd down on him an' bein' as I wasn't no more'n thirty yard away, standin' behind a spruce, I figgered on ketchin' him right behind the ear. It was as pretty a shot as a man would want. But, by God, I missed. An' before I

could throw another shell in my gun he was gone.”

“How come he was murdered, then—if you missed him?”

“Who?”

“Why, old man Mason, of course!”

“Cripes, I never shot at Mason! It was a moose! He jest happened to be in there clost to Mason’s cabin. But what with that fella seein’ me up there that day with my rifle, an’ him bein’ a friend of old man Mason’s, an’ the rest of ‘em on the crick not likin’ me on account I kinda looked down on ‘em fer wallerin’ around in the mud an’ gravel, instead of workin’ in rock, I figgered I wouldn’t git no break when the police got there. So I skipped out.”

“Ondoubtless a wise precaution,” Black John observed dryly. “An’ now you’ve got here, what do you aim to do?”

“Why—damn if I know. I ain’t figgered that fer ahead. What do you folks do?”

“We work. Cush here, he runs the saloon, an’ tradin’ post, an’ the rest of us works our claims. Nights an’ holidays, we sort of foregather here fer a little recreation—sort of a surcease from our long hours of toil. We play stud, er poker, h’ist a few drinks, an’ indulge in an occasional hangin’.”

“Hangin’? What do you mean—hangin’?”

“It’s a term we’ve got fer jerkin’ a man with a rope, one end of which has be’n throwed over a limb, er a rafter, accordin’ to the weather.”

“But—what do you hang ‘em fer?”

“Murder, larceny, claim-jumpin’ – most any kind of skullduggery will do. We keep Halfaday moral.”

“Sounds like you boys is kinda rough, up here. But it’s okay by me. I don’t aim to pull off nothin’. Nor neither I don’t aim to rut around in no gravel. Ain’t there no hard-rock minin’ along the crick?”

“No, we’re all placer men. But there’s an onlimited supply of assorted rocks in the contiguous mountains. There ain’t no reason a man couldn’t blast into ‘em, if he was so minded.”

THE other turned to Cush. “You got powder?” he asked.

“Yeah, there’s a few cases of giant in the storeroom—fuse an’ caps, too.”

“Okay, I’ll hunt around an’ locate me a claim. I seen an empty cabin, four five mile down the crick. Could a man move in there?”

Black John nodded. “He could. But he’d be sort of wavin’ a red rag in the face of the devil. That’s Olson’s old cabin, an’ it’s deemed to be onlucky.”

“By cripes, I don’t want nothin’ to do with it, then!” the man exclaimed. “My luck’s runnin’ porely enough as it is. Ain’t they no other shack? One that sets mebbe a little further back from the crick, so everyone that comes along can’t see it.”

“Was you expectin’ someone would be follerin’ you?”

“Well, old man Mason had a lot of friends. A man can’t never tell—a lot of ‘em figger I done it.”

“There’s One Eyed John’s cabin. It’s only a little ways down. You can move in there. He ain’t needed it sense we hung him a while back.”

“What did you hang him fer?”

“Oh, damn if I rec’lect now. Somethin’ he done—like spittin’ on the floor, er pickin’ his nose, er blowin’ in his saucer, er some sim’lar atrocity. It don’t make no difference. He’s dead. Come on, I’ll show you where it’s at.” Reaching down, Black John raised the man’s pack-sack from the floor, but before he could start out with it, the man jerked it out of his hand.

“I’ll tote that!” he exclaimed, and followed the big man out the door.

When Black John reentered the saloon

a few minutes later, old Cush thrust a pencil behind his ear and glanced down at a slip of paper on the bar. "Seventeen hundred ounces figgers a hundred an' six an' a quarter pounds. How does that check up?"

"What?"

"Don't 'what' me! I know why you h'isted that pack-sack! How does she check?"

The big man grinned. "It won't miss a hundred pounds very far. Cush, I fear you have a suspicious nature."

"Well, who the hell wouldn't have—the kind of pilgrims that trickles in on us?"

"So, you figure Stonewall's guilty of knockin' old man Mason off, eh?"

"Oh, hell, no! He couldn't be," Cush replied, with ponderous sarcasm. "If it wasn't him done it, how the hell would he know jest how many ounces was in Mason's cache? Besides bein' saw up there on the day of the murder. An' on top of that, fetchin' the dust along with him. Besides bein' a damn cache-robbin' murderer, he's dumb as hell. Did you leave One Eye's cache so he kind find it—jest in case we might want to locate them ounces, if anything should happen to this here Stonewall?"

II

THE following morning the man shouldered a light pack and struck out into the hills with the avowed intention of prospecting for a vein of quartz. A few hours later another man stepped into the saloon, interrupting a game of cribbage between Cush and Black John. He was an unprepossessing looking man, with humped shoulders, and long, ape-like arms. "This here's Cushing's Fort, ain't it?" he demanded, pausing behind Cush's chair.

Black John nodded, and pegged his

hand. Cush scanned the cards. "Hey, git back there!" he cried. "You pegged two holes too many. Six, seven, eight, an' two deuces is eleven—not thirteen, like you pegged up."

The big man glanced at the cards with a grin. "Guess yer right, at that," he admitted. "It takes two aces with a six, seven, an' eight to make thirteen. My mistake."

"Huh. Beats hell them mistakes of yours is allus in yore favor."

The newcomer butted in. "The hell with that game! Which one of you birds is runnin' this dump? I run outa lickin' a week back, an' I ain't had a drink sence!"

Black John grinned. "The enforced abstinence was ondoubtless a boon to yer guts," he said, shuffling the cards. "An' a couple more minutes won't hurt you none. I can deal out from here. An' then we'll all have a little snort. I ain't had a drink in quite a while, myself." A few moments later he pegged out, and glanced across at Cush. "I beat you twelve p'int's," he said. "That'll cost you a dollar-twenty, besides the drinks."

"Snort—hell!" the stranger exclaimed. "I figger on havin' a lot of snorts. I've had a long dry spell."

"Okay," the big man agreed. "Jest slip off yer pack an' pull up a chair an' Cush'll fetch the bottle an' glasses over here. If we're in fer a prolonged orgy, we might's well be comfortable."

THE man swung his pack to the floor and seated himself. When the glasses were filled, Cush ignored the well-filled sack the man tossed onto the table. "This un's on the house," he said. "Drink hearty."

The stranger picked up his glass. "Here's lookin' at you. My name's Smith—er—John Smith."

The big man nodded. "We can rectify

that error later,” he said, with a glance at the name can. “This here’s Cush, an’ I’m more or less widely known as Black John.”

The man nodded. “Yeah, I’ve heard tell about you fellas, up here. That’s why I come. Never figgered I’d be throwin’ with a bunch of outlaws. But by God, here I be!”

He downed his liquor, and refilled his glass. “Drink up, an’ have one on me. It jest goes to show a man can’t never tell a what’s goin’ to happen to him.”

Black John nodded. “Brother,” he said, “you’ve spoke a true word.”

“Yeah, a fortune teller told me one time down to Frisco about how I was goin’ on a long journey an’ have bad luck. I was kinda drunk, an’ didn’t give no heed to her, ‘cause how the hell could a woman look in a glass ball an’ tell what was goin’ to happen to someone she never even seen before? An’ besides, I never figgered on takin’ no long trip.

“A little while after I heard about this here Klondike so I come up here.

“An’ one night down to Dawson me an’ another guy got a little soused an’ went an’ had our fortune told by some woman name of Mrs. Lowe, an’ she told me about another trip I was goin’ to take, except she claimed I’d have good luck. She done it by lookin’ at some tea leaves in the bottom of a cup. Well—there it was again—another trip.

“Then I heard tell about a guy name of Swami, which everyone claimed he was the real thing. So I went an’ had me a seance. An’ by God—up pops that trip again! I ask him if there was good luck er bad luck at the end of it. But he claimed he couldn’t tell right then, on account his asteerial waves had got crossed up, er somethin’, an’ I’d have to come back next day. But I seen through his game, all right. These here wimmin only charged a dollar

a throw. But this here Swami, he soaked me five bucks—an’ him tellin’ me about these here waves gittin’ crossed was jest a come-on game, to git me back there with another five.”

The man paused, downed his drink, and refilled his glass. “You keep count of ‘em,” he said to Cush, “an’ take it outa there,” he pointed to the sack on the table. “I’ll prob’ly h’ist four, five, to you boys one, on account I ain’t had no lickier fer a week—got to kinda ketch up.”

Cush nodded. “I’m countin’ ‘em,” he said, “peggin’ every drink right here on the cribbage board. What was it you done that you figgered you had to skip to Halfaday?”

THE liquor was beginning to take hold, and the man blinked owlishly. “I never done nothin’. That’s the hell of it. I never done a damn thing. That’s why I come away.” He poured two more drinks and downed them, filling the glass to the brim. “Thash what I shay—a man can’t never tell whash goin’ to happen to him.” He turned to the big man. “Ain’t that sho, Bill?”

“John is the name.”

“Oh, sure. S’all the shame—John, er Bill, er Pete. Shome fellas ish name Henry, too.”

“But,” persisted Cush, “if you didn’t do nothin’, why did you come away from where you was at?”

The man downed another drink and pondered the question. “Shome one done it,” he announced. “Yup—shomeone on the crick murdered the ol’ man an’ robbed his cache—sheventeen hundred ounces. My claim wash nex’ to his, an’ a lot of the boysh on the crick figgers I done it. Fella told me they goin’ to call a miners’ meetin’ an’ string me up—so I come away. I ain’t no damn fool. I ain’t goin’ to stay aroun’ an’ git hung.”

Black John leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and rolled his eyes upward till only the whites showed. Then his voice boomed out in sepulchral tones. "I see a crick—ah yes—Lynx Crick is the name. A man is murdered. He is shot. And his cache is robbed. Seventeen hundred ounces in dust is stolen. The man's name is—it is—ah—yes—it is old man Mason."

"Hey there! What the hell! Who the hell be you? How'd you know about what crick it was on? An' how'd you know his name was old man Mason?"

Black John stirred, and met the other's wide-eyed stare, blinking in a bewildered manner. He passed a hand across his eyes as though to rid them of some obstruction. "Did I speak?" he asked. "It is nothing. I—I must have dropped into a trance."

"Yeah—that's jest what the Swami done! Cripes sake—be you a Swami?"

"Ah, yes, my friend. I have attained Yoga—the union of the individual with the divine. I can peer into the future, and I have knowledge of the dim an' distant past."

The man downed another drink. "By God, I'm lucky. When I come through Dawson I figgered on stoppin' in an' seein' if the Swami could tell me who done it—but he ain' there no more. Kin you fin' out who done it? I'll give you five bucks."

"Ah, yes, my friend. Old man Mason is in Nirvana. I shall have my control contact him there. He will tell all."

"But—s'pose he'd lie, an' claim I done it? He don' like me on account of them ten ounces."

"The spirits of the departed never lie to the earth-bound."

"Well, git hold of him, then, an' see what he says. But he's a damn liar if he claims I done it."

Black John frowned. "Not so fast, my

friend. The spirits abhor onseemly haste. Besides that, my control is a beautiful princess that's be'n dead four billion years—an' she don't git around as lively as she used to. On top of which old man Mason is a newcomer in Nirvana an' there wouldn't many folks know him. An' bein' as everyone that's ever died is there, my control might have to do considerable inquiren' around before she located him. But Bessie'll find him."

"Whosh Beshie?"

"My control—Bessie Abdul Ameer. The Abduls didn't like it when she married up with an Ameer, but they made the best of it, an' when he died, couple of billion years later, Bessie never married again. She was lookin' around fer somethin' to do, an' that's when I got holt of her an' broke her in fer a control. She's doin' all right, too—now she's got the hang of it. Like I said—she'll git holt of Mason, an' then we'll know who knocked him off. We'll pull off a seance, an' he'll either tell us, er write it on a slate."

"Ain't you got no idee who done it?" Cush asked, pegging up another drink against the man.

"Sure. It musta be' n shome' guy name Quintel. Usta be a shailor, er shumsin'. Ain' be' n on the crick very long. Which he had a three-corner scar missin' over his right eye."

"I don't quite git you—about this here scar," Black John said.

"Yeah. Three-corner one—like a triangle, if it was upside down. I sheen thish guy up by ol' man Mashon's place the day they claim he wash murdered."

"Then you was up there that day, too?"

"Sure I wash. Er elsh how come I sheen thish guy up there with hish rifle? An' on top of thish scar, Quintel don't be'n tattooed wish a nekid lady on hish forearm above the elbow. An' beshides which, a man can't be saw no place he

wasn't there."

"Listen," said Black John. "Let's git this straight. In the first place, a man's forearm ain't above his elbow. It's below it."

"Yeah, them tattooers ish l'ible to make a mishtake. Anyway Quintel might of be'n drunk when he got it done."

"But you said 'he don't be'n tattooed with a naked lady.' What do you mean by that?"

"Why—jes' like you claimed—he couldn't be, if that ain' where hish elbow's at." The man downed another drink. "Shometimes when I git li'l tight, my head gits in kinda confusal, sho what I talk 'bout ain't that, but it might be someshin' elsh, er mebbe it mightn't, too."

"Yer shore it wasn't you that knocked him off? You mentioned somethin' about ten ounces."

"Yeah, I sheen Mashon down to Briggs's shack 'bout a week before, an' I tried to collect ten ounces he win off'n me on a bet, but he wouldn't pay me, sho I hit him couple licks, an' when I come to, he wash gone. I claimed I'd shoot him, an' shome fellas wash there an' heard me—but I never."

"But you admit bein' up to his shack the day he was murdered?"

"Sure. I went up 'bout them ounces. But if he wash dead, how the hell could I pay him? Anyhow, they claimed I done it, sho I shkipped out."

"Well, now yer here; where do you figger on stayin'?"

"Oh, I got a tent. I'll camp shomewheres clost, sho I kin git a drink when I need one."

THE big man pointed to the pack-sack at the man's feet. "If you've got any dust in there, you better deposit it in Cush's safe. Tent campin', that way, someone might sneak up an' rob you, an'

we don't want no crime on Halfaday. Cush'll weigh it in fer you an' give you a receipt."

"Good idee," the man agreed. "Packs kinda heavy, an' I don' wan' loshe my dust."

Cush carried the sack to the bar, and returned a few minutes later to lay a slip of paper on the table. "There was jest seventeen hundred an' four ounces," he announced, eyeing the man frostily.

"An' that's jest about what was s'posed to have be'n lifted out of old man Mason's cache," Black John said.

"Shash right, ain't it?" the man said, pocketing the slip. "Looksh like me an' ol' man Mashon done 'bout the shame, don't it? But hey—I owe him ten ounces! Take ten ounces outa there an' gimme credik fer 'em. Damn him—I'll show him he can't beat me outa no ten ounces!"

The man leaned over the table, buried his face in his folded arms, and promptly went to sleep.

Black John followed Cush to the bar. "It looks," he grinned, "like things is gittin' a bit complicated."

Cush scowled. "Of all the damn screwballs I ever seen—he takes the cake! Why—the on'ery coon—comin' up here with them seventeen hundred ounces, an' claimin' he never done it!"

Black John grinned. "But how about Stonewall Grant?"

"Hell, we was wrong about him! Couldn't only one of 'em kilt Mason—an' this one's got the dust."

"How about that hundred-pound pack Stonewall had?"

"By cripes—I'd fergot about that!"

"An' it might be," Black John continued, "that both these birds is packin' their own dust."

"Huh—did you ever hear of three men havin' seventeen hundred ounces? That there's an odd number to have. T'ain't

reasonable.”

III

THE man woke up later in the day, paddled up the creek, and pitched his tent on a flat a few bends above the Fort.

Several days later another stranger showed up on the creek. One Armed John reported that a newcomer had moved into Olson’s old shack. And that same afternoon the man strode into the saloon where Cush and Black John were shaking dice for the drinks. Both noted that a triangular scar showed above his right eye, and as he rested his bared forearms on the bar, both pairs of eyes focused on the nude figure tattooed upon the bronzed skin.

“Hello, mates!” he greeted. “Well, I got here, an’ a long pull it was. Damned if I ever thought I’d be shippin’ on a craft I could pick up an’ carry!”

Cush slid a glass toward him. “Fill up,” he invited. “The house is buyin’ one.”

When the bottle had passed, the man raised his glass. “Down the hatch, my hearties! My name’s John Smith. I—”

“Jest a minute,” Black John interrupted. “Let’s revise that moniker before it becomes habitual. There’s twenty-five, thirty John Smiths on the crick a’ready. Reach in the name can there an’ draw out a slip. The name on it will serve as a stop-gap whilst you’re amongst us.”

The man grinned. “Pretty smart, at that,” he admitted. “Come to think of it, John Smith is a kind of common name, ain’t it? Well, here goes.” Reaching into the can he drew out a slip. “Jubal Hancock, it says.”

The big man nodded. “Okay, Jube. That there’s Cush, an’ I’m John Smith—sometimes referred to as Black John.”

“Yeah, I heard about you-all, up here on Halfaday where the damn police don’t

dast to show up. That’s why I come. Found a cabin down the crick a piece that didn’t look like it was used, so I moved in. It’s all right, ain’t it?”

“That’s Olson’s old shack,” Cush replied. “It’s claimed to be onlucky.”

“To hell with that. Long’s the deck’s all right, an’ the bulkheads is solid it’d be good enough fer me. My luck’s runnin’ good—never seen a damn police all the way up here.” He tossed a sack onto the bar. “Have one on me,” he invited. “There’s plenty more where that come from. Yes, sir—seventeen hundred ounces—all stowed away in as nice a little locker as a man would want. Found it right in the rocks where no one would ever think it would be. Nice flat rock layin’ there—fits snug as a hatch cover.”

“Hum,” Black John said, with a glance at Cush. “Seventeen hundred ounces. Kind of an odd amount, ain’t it? An’ amount that represents a good many days of honest toil, eh?”

“Yeah, you bet. I worked like hell fer that gold.”

“Sluice it out? Er pan it?”

“How?”

“I asked did you pan it, er sluice it out a of a dump?”

“Oh, both ways. It don’t make no difference to me. Sometimes one way, an’ sometimes another. Jest so I git it; that’s all I care.”

“Looks like you had a pretty good thing were you was,” the big man said. “It’s funny you’d come away.”

“Well, I kinda had to. It’s like this—an old cuss gits shot, an’ his dust stole. Some fellas claimed they seen me up near this man’s diggin’s that day, an’ bein’ as I’m a newcomer on the crick, they figger I done it.”

“Newcomer, eh? How long was you on the crick?”

“Who, me? Oh, ‘bout a month.”

"Looks like you done pretty good—takin' out seventeen hundred ounces in a month," Cush observed.

"Oh, I had a good claim. But if a man figgers he's goin' to git hung, by God he'll pull his freight no matter how good a thing he's got. Ain't that so, mate?" The man appealed to Black John who, instead of answering, stood leaning against the bar with his eyes rolled upward.

FROM the depths of the black beard his voice came in a deep sepulchral tone. "I see a crick. The name is—ah yes—it is—Lynx Crick. An old man lies dead in his shack. His name is—it is—ah, names are hard to get—the names of people. He was an old man—my control is laboring to tell me his name. Sometimes she cannot get the name. Ah, yes—it is—Mason—old man Mason. And in his cache was seventeen hundred ounces of dust—"

"Hey—what the hell comes off here?" cried the man, staring wide-eyed at the speaker. "Snap out of it! You talk like a damn Swami—an' by God, you look like one, too! Except you ain't no nigger."

The big man's eyes slowly returned to a normal position and took on a faraway expression. "My astral body has visited a far place—Nirvana, where I talked with Krishna, an' with Siva, the destroyer."

"By God, you be a Swami! I've had séances—in Calcutta, an' Bombay, an' Madras. That's jest the way they talk!"

"Ah, yes—we live in the time of Kali Yuga, the last an' the darkest of the four ages of the world."

"The hell with that! Listen, Swami—kin you tell the name of the one that done it?"

Slowly Black John's eyes met the other's gaze. "The one that done it?" he asked. "The one that done what?"

"Why the one that knocked off old man Mason! Kin you tell who done it?"

Black John shook his head. "No, not now. The one that done it is still among the earth-bound. His astral body has not yet be'n wafted to Nirvana. All things reveal themselves in time—but the time is not yet."

"When kin you tell?"

"Ah—who knows? There is no limit to space, nor is there an' end to time. Time enters not into the cosmos of the disassociated spirit dwellers in Nirvana—one minute—or a billion years—what matters it?"

"Then you can't tell, eh?"

"No. 'Tis a secret that lies with the gods—with the gods, and with Yama, the judge of the dead. It may be that at some future time, at a regular seance, the gods will name the man—but it is not likely."

"An' mebbe you can't never tell, eh?"

"Maybe not. The all-wise gods reveal only what they will."

The man seemed vastly relieved. "I'll buy a drink," he said, shoving his sack toward Cush. "It's too damn bad you couldn't find out who done it. Then I could go back to my claim." Sweat had gathered on the man's brow, and he wiped it on his sleeve. "Kind of hot in here," he said. "Well, drink up, mates. I'll be gettin' back. Seen a one-armed man down the crick. He claimed you run a stud game, up here."

"Oh, shore," Black John said. "Some of the boys is in most every night."

"Guess I'll have to come up an' try my luck tonight. Got to go back an' fetch up more dust than what I've got on me. This one little sack wouldn't last no time in a stud game, if my luck run bad."

When the man had gone Cush eyed Black John across the bar. "Damned if I ever seen the beat!" he exclaimed. "Some old cuss gits murdered, an' every damn man on that crick comes pilin' in on us, one by one, an' every damn one of 'em

guilty'er'n the ones that's already got here—an' the hell of it is, every damn one of 'em's got the dust!"

The big man grinned. "It don't make sense."

"Shore it don't make sense! But that's the way it is. At that," he added, with a scowl, "it makes jest as much sense as you wallin' yer eyes back an' claimin' yer a Swami. This ain't no time to be pullin' off no jokes—what with every damn murderer on a crick pilin' in on us!"

"There ain't only one of 'em that's a murderer."

"Yeah, but how the hell do we know which one it is? They all talk guilty, an' act guilty—claimin' their name is John Smith, like every other damn crook—an' then every one of 'em havin' the dust to prove it. We don't want no one on the crick which he would sneak in an' shoot an old man an' rob his cache."

"Yeah, it would seem an undesirable symptom fer a reg'lar residerter," Black John admitted. "As you p'inted out, the situation seems more or less muddled. That's why I figgered on layin' the matter in the laps of the gods—of Siva, the destroyer, an' Vishnu, the sun god, an' Brahma, the creator."

"Listen—don't try to pull none of that damn fool stuff on me! That there Swami wasn't nothin' but a damn fake—an' you know it!"

THE big man shook his head in resignation. "To you benighted earth-bound souls will never be revealed the mysteries that are vouchsafed to those of us who have attained Yoga, the union of the individual with the divine—the occult knowledge of the past and of the future, as imparted to us by Ramachandra, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, an' to me personally by my control, the beautiful Bessie Abdul Ameer. I have be'n

reincarnated after wandering in happiness for a billion years through the aspodal fields with Bessie."

"I'd ort to wham you right between the eyes with a bung starter! You never was nothin' but John Smith—er whatever yer name usta be—an' you ain't nothin' but him now! An' all this about Bessie Veneer, an' all the mother heathen gods ain't nothin' but a lot of crap."

Black John raised an arm and pointed toward the door. "Ah, my friend—look yonder—lo, here cometh Downey, the avenger!"

The young officer strode into the room and crossed to the bar. "What—no dice box! Seems like you fellas are kind of shirkin' yer work, ain't you?"

Cush scowled as he spun a glass across the bar. "No. John's jest be'n actin' the damn fool—claimin' like he's one of these here Swamis."

"What's on yer mind?" the big man asked, when the glasses were filled.

"A murder on a crick way up the Klondike. An old man got knocked off, an' his cache robbed. Three men skipped out—any one of 'em might have done it."

Again the big man's eyes rolled upward, and against the sepulchral tones reverberated through the room. "Ah—Lynx Creek, eh? And the name of the murdered man is Mason—and seventeen hundred ounces were taken from his cache."

Downey grinned. "So one of 'em be'n up here, eh?"

"One of 'em—hell! They're all here."

"Have you figured out which one's guilty?"

"I haven't even tried."

Old Cush peered over the top of his steel framed spectacles. "The first one that come, we figgered he was guilty, an' then the next one come, an' he was guiltier the other one, an' by God this here last one is

guilty as both them others put together.”

Downey laughed. “Which one’s got the dust?”

“They’ve all got it!”

“You mean—they’re together?”

“No. They don’t none of ‘em know the other ones is here. But each one of ‘em’s got them seventeen hundred ounces. John, there, he got a heft at the first one’s pack ‘fore he snatched it away, an’ she’ll go right around a hundred pound, which don’t miss seventeen hundred ounces very far, one way er another. The next one cached his dust in the safe. I weighed it in—seventeen hundred an’ four ounces. An’ the third one bragged of havin’ seventeen hundred ounces cached in the rocks.”

“That’s right,” Black John agreed. “Anyone of the three could be guilty. Did you go up on this here Lynx Crick an’ investigate?”

Downey nodded. “Yes, I went up there, but I haven’t got a damn thing to go on. Mason was shot through the heart in front of his empty cache an’ the bullet went on through his body. He was prob’ly shot with a rifle—but everyone on the crick’s got a rifle.

“All I found out is that he’d made his brag a couple of days before he was shot that he had seventeen hundred ounces in his cache—an’ a couple of days after he was shot, three different men had disappeared off the crick. I swung up this way on the chance that at least one of ‘em had hit for here. But if each one of ‘em’s got seventeen hundred ounces of dust, I don’t know how the hell I’m ever goin’ to find out which one is guilty.”

“Hum—you ain’t got nothin’ to go on, eh? Not a damn thing, Downey?”

“Nope—not a damn thing. Old man Mason laid there right in front of a rock crack in the rimwall that was undoubtedly his cache. The bullet that got him went on through an’ no chance of findin’ it, an’ I

couldn’t find any empty shell, neither. Unless I get a break of some kind it looks like here’s one murderer that’s goin’ scot free.”

“If I was you I’d haul in both of them three pilgrims an’ hang every damn one of ‘em,” Cush said. “Then you’d be shore of gittin’ the right one. We kin shore as hell git along without ‘em on Halfaday.”

Black John grinned. “There’s considerable merit in the suggestion. But you’ve got to remember, Cush, that it’s the onalienable right of every citizen to be hung fer the murder he committed—an’ no other. Manifestly, only one of these three men is guilty of this particular crime, an’ handicapped as Downey is by the fact that the law demands evidence, it looks to me like we’ll have to invoke the supernatural.”

“Some day,” Cush interrupted sourly, “yer goin’ to git tangled up in them big words an’ hang yerself.”

“As I was goin’ on to say, before our friend here with the single track an’ narrow gauge mind butted in, the only course open to us is to get in touch with old man Mason an’ ask him right out who done it.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?” Downey asked. “Mason’s dead.”

“We’ll arrange a seance. I’ll have thy control contact the old man in Nirvana an’ tell him to give us the low-down on who shot him. To those of us who have attained Yoga, the problem presents no difficulties whatever.”

The officer grinned. “I’d look pretty, wouldn’t I, haulin’ a prisoner up in court without nothin’ agin him except what was told to us by a dead man!”

“The evidence might appear a trifle inadequate,” the big man admitted. “But in the course of the proceedin’s other evidence might turn up, that would convince even a judge an’ a jury.

Anyways, onless you've got a better idee, I'm fer pullin' off a séance—I've wanted to try out them gadgets I fell heir to when the Swami attained complete freedom from all physical laws there in front of Cush's bar."

Downey shrugged. "I'm stumped. I suppose you might as well go ahead with it. But I'm warnin' you that I ain't making any arrests without concrete an' convincin' evidence to back up my charge."

"It is my hope to secure a confession. I assume that even the law will regard that as evidence."

Old Cush heaved a sigh of resignation and shoved the bottle toward Downey. "Might's well have another drink," he said. "Onct John gits an idee in his head, he'll go through with it spite of hell an' high water. But I never figgered he'd be damn fool enough to take up with the pranks of a rag-headed nigger, which he wasn't nothin' but a damn fake, to boot. An' what's more," he added, turning to Black John, "you ain't goin' to pull off no long-winded seance in this saloon tonight! The boys comes here to drink an' play stud."

"The seance," Black John interrupted in a voice of bored tolerance, "will be held in my cabin. Do you think for a moment that I would insult the gods, or even the most humble dweller in Nirvana, by summoning them to a saloon? Why, my good man, it's unthinkable! And my control, the beautiful and wonderous princess Bessie Abdul Ameer—imagine her chagrin an' mortification when her spirit found itself amid the surroundings of a common barroom! Suppose, fer instance, she'd step up to the bar here an' order a snort of nepenthe, an' you'd shove the whiskey bottle at her!"

"Huh," Cush grunted, "if she's as smart as what you claim she'd know damn

well a saloon way out on a crick like this wouldn't be servin' no mixed drinks. An' besides, don't try to pull off none of this here Swami stuff on me. Cripes, the kind of wimmin you've throw'd in with, now an' agin on Halfaday—an' the kind I've saw you trottin' around with in Dawson—anyone of 'em would think this here saloon was a church—the places *they* hang out at!"

Black John grinned broadly. "But you've got to remember, Cush, there ain't none of them characters has attained Yoga. Their individual egos ain't yet merged with the divine."

"I'll say they ain't," Cush retorted. "What I've saw of their carryin's-on, if anyone of 'em could git to hell when they died they'd be lucky."

"I fear, Cush, that your concept of the hereafter is rather hazy. At some future time I shall undertake to explain certain principles of theism, and deism—"

"I got rheumatism. An' by God, that's bad enough already."

"Time fleeteth," as a poet would say. I have work to do. I will depart hence. Our three suspects will ondoubtless show up here anon. Downey better slip over to my shack an' lay low. They might pull out on us, if they seen him here. An', Cush, you let One Armed John tend bar fer a while this evenin'. You're in on the seance, too. It will teach you not to scoff at matters beyond the ken of your minescule intellect. When darkness falls you bring Stonewall Grant," an' Jube Hancock, an' our drunken friend to my cabin. Their fate is in the lap of the gods. The wind riseth. I must be on my way."

"What's the wind got to do with it?" Cush asked sourly.

"Always, my friend, the wind whistleth weirdly among the far-flung stars of the illimitable astral void. Adieu."

IV

MAKING his way swiftly down the creek by the footpath, Black John visited the obviously convenient cache at Olson's old shack. Returning up the creek, he picked up Red John, by far the most intelligent of the residents of Halfaday, and as they proceeded to his own cabin the big man explained the set-up. Red John enthusiastically fell in with the plan, and they reached the cabin to find Corporal Downey waiting.

"First off, we'll take the stove down an' get it out of here," Black John said. "We need the hole in the roof where the stovepipe goes out, an' we need the room. This shack ain't none too big when you figger there'll be six of us in here—the three suspects, an' Cush, an' Downey, an' me."

"How about Red John?" Downey asked. "He makes seven."

"Red John ain't goin' to be inside. He'll be on the roof. He's Vishnu, er Siva, er Brahma, or Santa Claus—er whichever one of them old gods manipulates the manifestations that prove to the earthbound, like our three suspects, an' to the hidebound, like Cush, that there ain't no hocus-pocus to this here seance."

When the stove and pipe had been removed, Black John groped under his bunk and drew forth a trumpet, a dinner bell, and a violin, together with a tiny blue lamp, an' incense pot, a turban, a long blue robe, several blue pillows, and a dark blue tapestry which he draped over his bunk. "I'll lay there on the bunk, rared back on them pillows, an' through my control, I'll summon the spirit of old man Mason from its abode in Nirvana. We'll seat the three suspects on the bench in the middle of the floor, right under the hole in the roof, an' Downey an' Cush'll sit on the spare bunk, there. It's clouded up so it's goin' to be

dark as hell, an' they can't see no stars through the stovepipe hole. We'll rig a couple of empty bottles on the roof, right at the edge of the hole, so the wind will blow in their necks an' make a weird whistlin' sound, an' Red John'll lay there an' work the manifestations, as called fer. He'll give a poop on the horn, an' then drop it through the hole, an' he'll ring the bell, an' drop that through, too. That damn fiddle is too big to git through the hole, so he'll fiddle a few bars on the roof, an' drop the bow through. An' I'm bettin' that by the time we git through with 'em the one that's guilty will be ready to come acrost with a confession."

Corporal Downey grinned. "Okay—but I'm remindin' you, John, this has got to be a bona fide confession—not a frame-up."

"Why, damn you, Downey did you ever know me to frame anyone—onless he was guilty? Of course not. This here seance is strictly on the level—not a trace of charlatanism about it from first to last. We'll wait till dark—an' then pull it off." He turned to Red John: "An', by God, you lay up there on the roof so you don't have to move around none. These folks might suspect somethin' if they heard trompin' around above 'em" an' some of the dirt got to droppin' down their neck. You git a toeholt in that sod, an' lay still."

"It's too bad I didn't fetch along that little green god we found in the Swami's effects," Downey grinned. "The one I'm usin' fer a paperweight. It would add a sort of touch to the set-up."

Black John agreed. "Yeah, it would, at that—but cripes, I'll whittle one out of a potato, an' cover it with some of that there guilt paint Leonidas Dykes' wife had to shine up her slippers with. There won't none of these here suspects know whether a god art to be green er gold color—an' Cush shore as hell won't. It's beginnin' to

git dark, so we'll hustle an' git the stage set. John'll carry them manifestations up onto the roof, an' I'll light the incense an' get into this blue robe, an' put on my turban, an' light this little blue lamp. Downey, you set back in the corner, on the spare bunk there. I'll turn the blue light down so low they can't see nothin'. They'll be settin' facin' me, so, their backs'll be toward you. They won't know there's anyone here."

V

NIGHT settled with a heavy intense blackness that rendered the hole in the roof invisible in the dimly lit room. Presently footsteps sounded on the trail, and in a deep sepulchral tone, Black John answered the knock on the door. "Enter into the realm of the gods!" The door opened and four men stepped into the room. The booming voice continued: "The three men from Lynx Crick will be seated on the bench in the middle of the room facing me. The other will seat himself on the spare bunk."

"Cripes! What stinks in here?" Cush explained, sniffing audibly.

"Silence!" thundered the voice of the blue-clad, white-turbaned figure that reclined among the pillows of the blue-draped couch. "The aroma that greets your nostrils is the exquisite attar wafted directly from the garden of the gods, in the far-flung fields of Nirvana."

"Huh," grunted Cush, seating himself on the spare bunk. "Why the hell don't you turn up the light? We didn't think you was to home. That there little lamp don't give no more light than one of these here worms you kick out of a rotten stump."

"Silence! The harsh rays of a bright light counteract the delicate vibrations that emanate from the souls of the departed. Only the dim blue rays blend with the

emanations from Nirvana." The turbaned figure fixed his eyes upon the three who faced him from the bench. "Now, my good men, the time has arrived when the innocent among you shall be vindicated—and the guilty condemned. My control, the beauteous Bessie Abdul Ameer, has notified me that she finally located old man Mason, the victim of a foul murder. His soul has arrived in Nirvana in good shape, an' he's ready to talk."

"By God, if he claims I done it, he's a damned liar!" cried Stonewall Grant.

"Me neither!" exclaimed the drunken character. "I was up there that day—but I never shot him!"

"He's a damn liar if he claims I done it!" Jubal Hancock added.

"Silence!" roared the turbaned figure. "Know, ye earthbound fools, that the dead never lie! The words of the departed are true words. No falsehood may be uttered in the presence of the all-knowing gods. The words of the departed are words of truth. I shall now summon my control." Rolling back his eyeballs till only the whites showed, he called loudly. "Bessie!" After a full minute of silence, he called again. "Hey, Bessie! Ah, here you are. Now, Bessie, you skitter around an' get holt of old man Mason—him I was speakin' to you about last night—the guy that got shot on Lynx Crick. An' shake a leg, Bessie—we don't want to hang around here all night. An', by the way, Bessie—tell him to fetch along some manifestations so we'll know it's him—a bell, an' a horn, an' a fiddle—in that order." The turbaned figure eyed the three. "We shall soon know who shot old man Mason," the deep voice announced solemnly.

Jubal Hancock fidgeted uneasily on his seat. "Cripes—that wind! I never heard wind whistle so damn spooky-like."

"Wind? You are now in the presence

of the gods. What you mistake for wind is the shriekin' an' wailin' of lost souls—the voice of the damned—the ones that was kicked out of Nirvana fer somethin' they done before they got there. Fer evermore they're doomed to whistle an' wail amongst the far-flung stars of the illimitable outer void, huntin' fer a place to light. But they won't find none. That's why them sharp p'int is on all the stars—to keep the damned from roostin' on 'em. Yer sin-blistered soul is right now stripped to its naked hide. In a matter of moments the gods will be probin' deep within' its festered cosmos, an' should they find that it was you that knocked off old man Mason, there'll be a new soul addin' it's wailin' to the celestial din."

The sailor half rose from the bench. "I'm gittin' the hell outa here," he croaked. "I was a damn fool to come in the first place!"

"Silence! Bessie is approaching, accompanyin' her I see a dim shape—the shape of an old man. Bessie is speakin'." For a few seconds the turbaned one lay with his eyes rolled back. His lips moved. "That's him, eh? Okay, Bessie. You can trot along, now. I'll talk to old man Mason. What's yer name? Mason, eh? How long you be'n dead? Okay. Died of some disease, I s'pose? Oh—got shot, eh? On Lynx Crick, you say? Shot in the back, I s'pose—so you can't tell who done it? No? In front, eh? An' you did see the one that shot you? Did, eh? He was robbin' yer cache, an' you ketched him at it—an' he let you have it with a rifle, eh? Do you know his name? Don't, eh? But you'd know him if you seen him? Well now, Mason—jest so we'll know that everything's on the up-an'-up, I'm goin' to ask you how much dust you had in yer cache, an' if there's any way of identifyin' this here dust? Seventeen hundred ounces, eh? In twenty-two sacks? Oh—in one of

the sacks is a nugget that looks like a bear. Okay, Mason—that's fine. That had ort to clinch the case, all right. But there's one other thing. This here's a damn serious business fer the one found guilty. He'll get strung up, shore as hell. So to make doubly shore I'm askin' you to show three different manifestations—jest so these parties'll know it's you that's givin' the information—an' no one else. So come acrost with 'em, Mason, an' they'd better be in the right order—er Bessie'll go straight to Siva, the destroyer, an' tell him yer a fake."

Out in the night a bell rang loudly, and the next instant it dropped into the room with a raucous jangle.

"Ouch, my toe!" cried Stonewall Grant.

"Silence!"

From the outer dark came three loud blasts of a trumpet, and the next instant Jubal Hancock cried out sharply as the trumpet thumped to the floor. "The damn thing ketched me square on the head—I'm gittin' the hell outa here!"

"Silence!" roared the voice. "Anyone leaving his seat will be struck dead before he can reach the door. " 'Tis onseemly—these rude interruptions in the presence of the gods!"

From somewhere above came strains from a violin, and a moment later a bow dropped to the floor. Once again the voice boomed from the couch. "So you see, men, it was old man Mason, an' no one else who spoke. I called off them manifestations before Bessie got holt of him—so you can all see there's no hokus-pokus about this seance. All that remains is to find a small nugget in the shape of a bear. And the man in whose possession it is found is the man who murdered old man Mason an' robbed his cache."

"By God, you kin search my stuff!" cried Stonewall Grant. "I ain't got no

dust—only about a hundred pound of hardrock samples. I'll take you to my cache an' you kin see fer yerself!"

"An' you kin search my dust," the drunken hombre added. "It's right there in Cush's safe—every damn ounce of it!"

JUBAL HANCOCK rose to his feet. "I don't give a damn what old man Mason says—I never done it!"

"He never claimed you did," came the voice from the couch. "All he says is that in one of them sacks of his there's a nugget that looks like a bear. If there ain't no sech nugget amongst yer dust, yer clear."

"It's all damn nonsense! I ain't goin' to let no one search my dust. I've got it cached—where no one but me kin find it. An' by God—that's where it stays!"

"You refuse to submit to a search of yer dust?"

"Yer damn right I do!"

"An' you won't tell us where yer cache is?"

"No, I won't! I'll never tell!"

"Okay. In sech case we'll put it up to the gods."

AGAIN Black John rolled back his eyes and the deep voice bellowed loudly in the little room. "Bessie! Hey, Bessie! Where the hell are you?" After several moments of silence the voice spoke again. "Oh, there you are! Well, after this, don't go kihootin' all over Nirvana when there's a seance goin' on. I never can tell when I'll need you. Skip over to the inner sanctum and get holt of Siva, the destroyer, an' Brahma, the creator, an' India, the golden god wielder of thunderbolts, pronto. I want to find out about a cache. Oh, they don't, eh? Ramachandra, the Seventh Incarnation of Vishnu, handles the cache cases, eh? Okay, git holt of him, then—an' tell him

I'm in a hurry." After a full minute of silence the voice spoke again: "Hello, Rama! How they comin'? Yeah—a fella here won't tell where his cache is at. Yeah, he knocked off old man Mason—you've prob'ly seen Mason—he's a chechako in Nirvana. Yeah, that's him, all right—from Lynx Crick. Mason's cache was robbed, an' this guy's got his dust an' we want to run through it an' find a certain nugget that'll convict him beyond doubt. Yeah—the guy's a sailor, an' his name is alias Jubal Hancock. Oh—at the foot of the rim-wall, about eighty yards due west of Olson's old cabin on Halfaday Crick, eh? There's a flat stone over the top—fits clost, eh? Good work, Rama, old boy. Yeah, we'll find it, all right. So long."

The figure rose from the couch. "Okay, Cush, light the lamp there in the bracket."

"An', Downey, you better slip the cuffs on Jube, there. He seems to be the most likely candidate fer the hangin'. Cush an' I'll look after the other two. It won't take long to run through their stuff. Then we'll go down the creek to Olson's old shack where Jube's got his cache. An', believe me—if there's a nugget the shape of a bear in one of them sacks, you've got an iron-clad case."

The men proceeded to the saloon, where they sifted the dust in all of the drunkard's sacks and, finding no nugget of any size, they proceeded to One-Eyed John's shack where Stonewall Grant produced his pack from the cache in the wall, and proved that it contained nothing but hard rock samples. Jubal Hancock was lowered for safekeeping into the hole, a cell-like aperture beneath the storeroom, and a barrel of pork rolled onto the trap door.

Early the following morning, Cush, Black John and Downey conducted the prisoner to Olson's old shack, and straight

to the rimwall. Twenty-one sacks were removed from the well-known cache, and from the third one Black John extracted the nugget that looked like a bear.

Hancock wilted. "All right—all right! I done it. I'll admit it. I heard him make his brag that he had seventeen hundred ounces in his cache, an' I went to git it. He ketched me at it, an' I let him have it. An' that's all there is to it. I killed him—go ahead an' hang me, an' be damned!"

A HALF-HOUR later, with a written confession in his pocket, signed by the three witnesses, Downey headed down the creek with his prisoner.

Returning to the saloon Cush set out bottle and glasses and eyed the big man across the bar. "How'd you know which one of them damn skunks done it?" he demanded.

Black John grinned. "Why, old man Mason told me the nugget was in one of

his sacks, an' Ramachandra told me where the dust was cached—so it couldn't of be'n no one else."

"To hell with this here Raymond Chandler business! You've know'd where that cache of Olson's is at fer years. You can't fool me! That's the nugget old Solomon Albert got off'n Koogler, that time. What I mean, how did you know whose dust to plant it in?"

"Why, when I told Jube I was a Swami, he sweated like hell till I told him I couldn't name the murderer—then all to onct, he showed vast relief. The other two really wanted the seance. They had nothin' to fear—an' they knew it. An' now, mebbe next time you'll have faith in a seance."

"Well, I'll say it was damn spooky. But they was one thing that somehow didn't seem right. Where the hell would them old Hindu gods learn to play 'Turkey in the Straw'?"