

*"What a Man Done Before He Come to Halfaday is His Own
Business; After He Gets Here, He's Got to Live Moral as Hell"*



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, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, carefully folded the newspaper he had been reading, placed it on the back bar, shoved the square-framed, steel-rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead, and reached for a bottle, two glasses, and a leather dice-box as Black John Smith crossed the floor and elevated a foot to the battered brass rail.

Black John picked up the box, rattled the dice, banged it on the bar a time or two and rolled out the little cubes. "I'll leave them three sixes in one seein' as I feel kind of lucky, this mornin'," he said.

Cush gathered the dice, and rolled them out onto the bar. "There's three aces that says yer sixes ain't worth a damn. How does yer luck feel, now?"

"It would feel a damn sight better if you'd rattle them dice around a little instead of slidin' 'em out the same way you put 'em in."

"I rolled 'em fair an' square, an' you know it," Cush retorted, as he returned the

dice to the box, shook them, and rolled them out onto the bar. "That's a horse on you, an' if you don't beat them four deuces in one, it'll be two horses an' the drinks on you."

Black John failed to beat the four deuces. As he filled his glass, Cush made the proper entry in his day book, and filled his own. He indicated the folded newspaper with a jerk of the thumb. "I seen a piece in the paper there where it tells about some fella down to Chicago which he got somethin' the matter with some bone in his leg that laid him up, an' three, four different doctors fooled around with it an' didn't do him no good, an' finally they figgered the best way was to cut off the leg an' be done with it. But the fella wouldn't let 'em, an' he hired some doctor to come clean from Noo York. An' this here Noo York doctor he went down to the slaughter house an' got the leg bone out of a sheep they killed down there, an' sawed out part of this here fella's leg bone, an' spliced the sheep bone onto, it, an' by God, the fella got all right! Now what do you know about that?"

"Not a hell of a lot, except I would want no part of a sheep spliced on to me—

‘fraid I might start growin’ wool instead of hair, er mebbe I’d jest stand here an’ blat when I wanted a drink.”

Both turned at the sound of a chuckle, and eyed the stranger who had stepped into the room and was approaching the bar. “What’s this about blattin’ when you want a drink?” the man asked.

Cush reached for a glass and slid it across the bar as the newcomer lined up besides Black John. “Fill up,” he said. “The house is buyin’ one. The blattin’ was jest some fool notion of John’s, there. I was tellin’ about a piece I seen in the paper where some doctor splices a sheep’s leg bone onto a fella on account somethin’ ailed the fella’s leg, an’ the fella gits all right again’, an’ John he claimed he wouldn’t want no part of a sheep spliced to him er he might start growin’ wool an’ blattin’. By God, what I claim—if splicin’ on a sheep’s bone would put two good legs in under me, I wouldn’t give a damn if I would grow a little wool, here an’ there—er blat a little when I talked!”

THE stranger laughed, and swung a light packsack to the floor at his feet. “I guess there wouldn’t be much danger of that. The fact is I was very much interested in the newspaper account of that operation, myself. Bone grafting is ticklish business, at best. I’ll look forward to seeing the technical account in the medical journal.”

“You a doctor?” Black John asked.

“Yes. A doctor turned prospector. I saw that general practice in a small town wasn’t getting me anywhere, so when the papers began printing glowing accounts of the gold country up here, I decided to take a shot at it.”

“The accounts was ondoubtless a damn sight more glowin’ than the country,” the big man observed. “Ever do any prospectin’?”

“No,” the man replied, filling his glass

from the bottle Cush shoved toward him. “But neither have most of the others I’ve talked with since leaving Seattle. I figure my chance of making a strike ought to be as good as the next man’s.”

Black John nodded. “Yeah, just about. There ain’t but damn few chechakos goin’ to make a strike. Most of ‘em’ll be lucky to make wages. Where’d you hear about Halfaday Crick?”

The stranger picked up his glass. “Here’s how,” he said, nodding at Cush. He swallowed the liquor at a gulp, returned the glass to the bar, and glanced at Black John.

“Halfaday Creek? I never—er—heard of Halfaday Creek.”

“Jest happened in on us, eh?”

“That’s right. I drifted down the Yukon in a canoe I picked up at Whitehorse, and happened to camp at the mouth of the river into which this creek flows. After I’d eaten my supper I sat there and watched the boats drift past—dozens of them, all heading down the Yukon. And I got to thinking that with all these people crowding into the Dawson area, besides those who are already there, a man would have a much better chance of finding gold if he explored a river not so thickly populated. So in the morning I headed up this river, and eventually came to the mouth of this creek. At various spots along the Yukon I had heard men say that gold was more likely to be found on small creeks than upon the larger rivers, so I left the river and pushed on up this creek. I was much surprised to find that it is already occupied.”

“You was, eh? Yer name ain’t by any chance John Smith, is it?”

“Why—no. It’s Jones—Franklin K. Jones, M.D. And—may I ask your name?”

“That’s Lyme Cushing, there behind the bar. Cush, he’s the proprietor of this emporium. An’ I’m John Smith—better

known as Black John, owin' to my whiskers bein' tinged with that color."

"Oh—you're Black John!" the man exclaimed, then hastened to add, "Seems to me I heard the name mentioned—Whitehorse, or possibly Lake Bennett."

"Nothin' detrimental to my character, I trust?"

"No, no! Certainly not! In fact I don't remember anything except that the name struck me as odd, that's all."

"Yeah, John Smith is a kind of an odd name, at that—when you come to think about it. An' now yer here, do you figure to tarry amongst us—er shove on?"

"Well, I don't want to intrude on anyone. That is, I mean that if this creek has already been prospected to the extent that a man wouldn't stand much chance of locating a claim that would be worth while, there wouldn't be any point in staying here. On the other hand, if there is a chance of making good, it would be mighty convenient to be located near a trading post. It would no doubt be quite a trip to Dawson for supplies."

"Yeah, it's quite a trip, all right. Halfaday Crick ain't what you'd call overpopulated. None of us has ever made what you could call a hell of a strike. But plenty of us is takin' out better than wages. An' there's a hell of a lot of likely ground that ain't be'n staked yet."

"In that case, if it's all right with you men, I believe I'll locate here. I have a tent, and I can pitch it somewhere in the vicinity till I can find a likely location."

"You won't need to bother about settin' up yer tent," Black John said. "Jest throw yer stuff into One Eyed John's cabin. It's handier'n a tent."

"But—this One Eyed John? Won't he object?"

"He ain't apt to. We hung him a while back."

"Hung him! What for?"

"Damn if I remember. Ondoubtless it was fer somethin' he done."

"You mean, you lynched him!"

"Hell—no! Lynchin' is one form of amusement that wouldn't be tolerated on Halfaday fer a minute. He was hung by due process of a miners' meetin'. You see, Doc, layin' clost to the Alaska line, like we do, quite a few of the boys that inhabits the crick is miscreants of one sort or another, it bein' handy fer 'em to step acrost into Alaska if he's a Yukon wanted—an' vicy vercy, if he's a U. S. wanted. What a man done before he come to Halfaday is his own business. After he gets here, though, he's got to live moral as hell. I don't mean he's got to obey all of the ten commandments to the letter—but he's got to refrain from murder, larceny in any form, claim jumpin', an' all forms of skullduggery."

"How do you define skullduggery?"

"It's a flexible term, its definition dependin' entirely on circumstances." The big man paused, his glance resting on the light pack at the doctor's feet. "Is that all the outfit you fetched in with you?"

"Oh, no. I left the rest of my stuff in my canoe at the landing. This bag contains merely a few personal items. Where is this cabin you mentioned?"

"It sets back from the crick a piece, about forty rod down from here. I've got a few minutes to spare. If you'd like, I'll help you pack yer stuff down there. After you get settled you better come on back to the fort here, an' meet the boys. They generally come driftin' in of an evenin', for a few drinks er a session of stud. They'll be glad to know we've got a doctor on the crick—in case someone got sick."

"I'll be glad to do whatever I can. My supply of drugs is of necessity extremely limited. And beyond a scalpel or two, and an assortment of forceps and retractors, I

brought no instruments.”

“That’s ondoubtless enough. I cut off a fella’s leg once with a meat saw an’ a huntin’ knife.”

“Did the man live?”

“Shore he did! What the hell d’you think I cut his leg off for? He’d died of blood p’izen if I hadn’t.”

AFTER helping the newcomer with his outfit, Black John returned to the saloon.

“It ain’t no bad idee—havin’ a doctor amongst us,” Cush opined, as he set out the bottle and glasses. “I mean, like if he really is one.”

“If he ain’t a doctor, he’s a damn good imitation of one,” the big man replied. “He opened up one of his packs an’ took out a little black leather bag like doctors carry their stuff around in.”

“Seems kinda funny a doctor would quit his business an’ pull out like he done, fer to try somethin’ he don’t know nothin’ about—like prospectin’. Do you figger he’s on the up-an-up?”

“It’s my candid an’ unequivocal opinion t that he’s ondoubtless one of the most onmittigated prevaricators who ever foisted himself into our midst.”

“Yeah—an’ on top of all that, I figger he’s a damn liar—him claimin’ he hadn’t never heer’d of Halfaday Crick, an’ then speakin’ out, kinda s’prised like, when you says you was Black John. An’ when you says did he hear nothin’ dentermetal to yer character, he says ‘no, certainly not!’ Anyone would know he’s a damn liar.”

Black John scowled. “What do you mean by that?”

“What I mean—it’s a cinch he’d heard of Halfaday, an’ you, too. An’ if he’d heard of you, he’d heard you was an outlaw—an’ what I claim, if that ain’t dentermetal, er whatever you’ call it, to yer character—what the hell is? Besides

that, if he hadn’t heer’d about Halfaday Crick, why the hell would he show up here? You know damn well there ain’t no chechako goin’ to go kihootin’ alone up some river like the White into a country he don’t know nothin’ about, to do somethin’ he don’t know how to do when he gits there.

“You know as well as I do that chechakos is like salmons an’ snowbirds, an’ sech as that—they go in flocks. Who ever seen one snowbird in a flock by hisself? An’ who ever seen one salmon head up a river alone?”

Black John grinned. “Yer reasonin’ seems sound, even if yer exposition of it is a bit abstruse.”

“When they make bigger words, you’ll say ‘em,” Cush replied, wearily, “but they won’t mean nothin’ to me. I seen you had yer eye on that there little pack he fetched in an’ set on the floor by his feet when you told him he could move into One Eyed John’s cabin. I don’t s’pose you managed to git a squint inside of it to find out what them there ‘personal items’ was that he claimed was in it?”

Black John frowned. “You know damn well that pack didn’t thump the floor hard enough to have had much dust in it. Personal items means things like a man’s comb, an’ toothbrush, an’ mebbe an’ extry shirt, er a pair of socks.”

“Yeah,” Cush replied dryly, “an’ if them there items was mixed in with a few packages of big bills, they wouldn’t thump the floor very hard, neither. Jest you remember, John—when we hang that damn cuss, I git cut in on the proceeds.”

II

THE stranger fitted himself into the life of Halfaday Creek. His evenings were spent at Cush’s saloon where the men of the creek were wont to forgather. He

played a good game of stud, drank drink for drink with the best of them, and held his liquor well. During the daytime he wandered up and down the creek, taking much interest in the sluicing operations, lending a helping hand here and there, asking innumerable questions about the business of prospecting for gold. When a flume support gave way and caught Red John beneath it, he deftly set and splinted the broken arm. And when, one evening, Short John complained of a persistent pain in his belly, he performed a neat appendectomy, on a makeshift operating table, with Black John as assistant, while the men of Halfaday looked on in wide-eyed approval.

Thus three weeks passed when he showed up in the saloon one morning with pan, shovel and blankets, and interrupted a dice game between Cush and Black John. He tossed an empty packsack onto the bar.

"Fill that up with grub enough for a three or four weeks' trip into the hills. I've got a fish line and some hooks, so you don't need to go very heavy on the meat."

"Goin' to do a little prospectin'?" Black John asked.

"Yes. I've been looking on and bothering the boys with questions till I guess I've got the hang of it. They most of them agree with you, that there are plenty of good locations left here on Halfaday. But I've got a hunch that maybe, on some creek that hasn't been prospected, I might strike something really big. If I don't hit it, there'll be plenty of time to come back and play a sure thing, later."

"Oh, shore," the big man agreed. "Gold's where you find it, an' you might be the one to hit the jackpot. But there's a hell of a lot of country back there in the hills. Look out you don't get lost."

"I've got a compass. Guess I can find my way back, all right."

When the man had departed with his pack, Cush eyed Black John. "Y'know, I kinda hate to see him go. I've sort of felt safer, after seein' them jobs he done on Red John an' Short John. By God, if he hadn't of be'n here, Red John might of got his arm set wrong, an' Short John might of died of that there appendeetus he had in his guts. He's all right—Doc is. An' when you come to think about it, he might not be no crook, at that. He never claimed his name was John Smith."

Black John scowled. "Why, you damn fool—everyone whose name happens to be John Smith ain't a crook!"

"Not mebbe if that's their reg'lar name. But if they claim their name's that, they're damn apt to be. All a man's got to do is look around him to know that. We're so used to havin' damn liars show up here, that when he first come I didn't even believe he was no doctor."

"Oh, he's a doctor, all right—an' a pretty damn good one. But I've got a hunch that he's also somethin' else."

"How do you mean—somethin' else?"

"How old would you figure he is?"

"Well, I'd say somewheres around thirty-five, forty."

"Do you rec'lect what he said when he first got here, about seein' that general practice in a small town wasn't gettin' him anywheres."

"Yeah. That's what he claimed."

"Um-hum. An' what I claim, if general practice in a small town would net a man eighty thousan' dollars in cold cash by the time he's forty, he wouldn't figure it wasn't gettin' him anywheres. An' he wouldn't pull up an' hit out for the Klondike, or anywhere else—not if he had all his buttons, he wouldn't."

"Eighty thousan' in cash!" Cush exclaimed. "How do you know he's got eighty thousan'?"

"It's in that there little pack of 'personal items' he fetched in with him, that first mornin' he showed up. I mistrusted there was more in it than a few socks an' an extra shirt or two, or he'd have left it in his canoe at the landin' with his other stuff. So one evenin' durin' a stud game in which he was ridin' a winnin' streak, I slipped over to One Eye's cabin, an' sort of looked around a little. Most everyone that moves in there finds that secret cache behind that loose log in the wall, an' he's no exception. I deem it expedient, for the good of the crick, to sort of get a line on the various characters that shows up amongst us, so I give his cache the once-over."

"I figgered the same way," Cush said. "An' don't you fergit, when you come to divide that there eighty thousan' up, you divide it between the two of us—an' not jest you! I seen that pack as quick as you did!"

The big man grinned. "What do you mean—divide? Listen, Cush, as long as Doc stays amongst us, an' refrains from committin' any crime on the crick, that eighty thousan' is as safe in his cache as it would be in the Bank of England. On Halfaday, we respect property rights. That eighty thousan' is his property an' it's none of our business how it was come by."

"Yeah, but you know damn well he never saved up no eighty thousan' dollars doctorin' folks in no little town, an' him not no older'n what he is. He got that eighty thousan' crooked—an' you know it. What I claim, onct a crook allus a crook. An' anyways, we got a right to hope, ain't we?"

NEARLY a month passed before the doctor returned to Halfaday. He reported having no luck in the hills, prospected here and there along the creek, and was a nightly visitor at the saloon.

A week after his return Corporal Downey appeared at Cush's, accompanied by another. "Any strangers showed up here within the last week, or two?" he asked as he lined up beside Black John at the bar.

The big man shook his head. "Nope. Has some specific crime be'n committed? Or you jest makin' a general roundup of the sinful?"

"The Yukon Dredge Company's thirty thousan' dollar pay-roll that the bank was sendin' out to Ophir was knocked off about six miles out of Dawson. This man here is the guard that was sent out with the messenger."

"Cash pay-roll, I s'pose?" Black John asked.

The guard answered. "Yes, the messenger he carried it in a satchel. He was walkin' ahead along the trail an' I was behind him with a rifle. When we come to a place where the trail bends around a big rock, I hear a noise like a thump, an' the messenger goes down an' the satchel rolls into the bresh. Then before I kin swing the gun on him, a guy jumps out in front of me an' swings at me with an iron bar—an' that's the last thing I know'd till I woke up in the horspital. But before the damn cuss hit me, I got a good look at him—an' you bet, I'd know him if I seen him in hell!"

"An' besides that," Downey added, "I got the best bunch of finger prints I ever seen. I got 'em off the iron bar he killed the messenger with, an' off an empty tin an' an empty whiskey bottle the robber left there beside the trail. He evidently knew about the pay-roll an' laid in wait fer the messenger. While he was waitin' he et a tin of peaches an' finished off a bottle of liquor. He must have got his hands sticky from the peaches, an' then handled the bottle, an' the tin, an' the bar. I fetched photographs of the prints along with me, an' sent photos of 'em down to Ottawa to

be checked up with prints they've got there of known crooks.

"This finger printin' has got to be quite a thing, the way they're workin' it. They're havin' us send in the finger prints of the different crooks we pick up, an' they're classified an' filed away together with the crook's name an' record.

"It's like if some burglar left his finger prints on a safe he cracked in Montreal, an' mebbe got caught an' done time fer it, an' after he was turned loose a set of prints comes in off'n a safe, say, in Vancouver. The expert in charge of the finger prints in Ottawa could tell at a glance, by the whorls, an' islands, an' curves of the prints, that the same guy done both jobs. They've even figured out a way with numbers an' letters, wrote above an' below a line, so one finger print man can describe a set of prints to another by mail.

"It wouldn't take much of an expert to spot these prints, though, because besides the whorls, an' islands, an' things, this guy's got a scar on the index finger of his right hand. A lot of times you might run acrost two men that look alike—but they ain't never yet found two guys with the same finger prints. A witness might be mistaken. Or he might even try to lie someone into trouble—but finger prints ain't never mistaken—an' they don't lie."

BLACK JOHN nodded approvingly. "It looks like a swell set-up if it works as good as you figure it does. I'm tellin' you, Downey, a few more systems like that, an' the damn crooks won't have a chanct."

"They ain't got much of a chanct, as it is—if they leave their finger prints around," Downey replied, as he tossed off the drink that stood before him.

A man entered the room, and the next instant a loud cry from the guard riveted all eyes on the newcomer. "There he is

now! That's the coot that knocked off the messenger an' clouted me over the head with that iron bar! Grab him, Corporal! There's yer man!"

The newcomer paused for a moment, meeting the blazing eyes of the guard with a smile. "What's all this?" he asked, advancing to the bar. "My good man, what in the world are you driving at?"

"You know damn well what I'm drivin' at! Where's that there satchel with the Yukon Dredge's pay-roll in it that you grabbed off'n that messenger there on the trail?"

The man turned to Downey, who had stepped to his side. "What does he mean, officer? Or is he some lunatic you've taken in tow? He mentioned having been clouted over the head with an iron bar. May have suffered some injury to the brain."

"I guess his brain's all right," Downey replied dryly. "At least, the doctors at the hospital said it was when they let him go. On his identification, I'm arrestin' you for murder an' robbery—the murder of a messenger, seven miles out of Dawson, on the Ophir trail, an' the robbery of the thirty-thousan' dollar pay-roll he was carryin' at the time."

The prisoner laughed. "The idea is preposterous. Murder and robbery, indeed! If this poor fellow is identifying me in good faith, he's mistaken—that's all."

"We'll know damn quick whether he's mistaken or not," Downey replied, and shot a reproachful look at Black John. "I thought you said no strangers had showed up on the crick in the last week or two?"

The big man nodded, "That's right. None that I've seen or heard of. Doc, here—he's be'n livin' amongst us fer a couple of months. You fellas has be'n doin' so much talkin' I ain't had a chanct to introduce you. Corporal Downey, meet Doc Jones."

The doctor grinned affably. "You're a little late, John," he said, glancing down at the handcuffs Downey had slipped onto his wrists. "Corporal Downey has met me already."

Downey eyed the man sharply. "Be'n right here on the crick all the time? Every day, fer the last couple of months?"

"Well, no. I've been on a prospecting trip out in the hills."

"Yeah? An' how long was you gone on that?"

"About three weeks."

"Didn't go down nowheres near Dawson, I s'pose?"

"I did not."

"The hell an' you didn't!" blurted the guard. "By God, you was within seven miles of Dawson when you knocked off that pay-roll!"

"If that man's not demented, he's sadly mistaken," the doctor said glancing into Downey's eyes. "And you are making a serious mistake in arresting me for a crime I had nothing whatever to do with."

Corporal Downey smiled grimly. "It won't take long to find out how much of a mistake I'm makin'," he said. "Hold out yer hands."

As the man thrust his manacled hands forward, Downey took the right one in his hand and examined the index finger. His brow clouded. He dropped the hand, and opening his pack, withdrew a packet from which he produced an ink-pad and a sheet of paper. Pressing the man's fingers onto the pad, he carefully transferred his prints to the paper. Picking up a magnifying glass, he studied the prints minutely, then with the glass scrutinized a set of finger print photos he took from the packet. Very deliberately, he returned the items to their place, and replaced the packet in his pack. Then he unlocked the cuffs from the man's wrists.

"Sorry, Doctor," he said. My mistake. Or that man's, rather." He indicated the guard with a jerk of the thumb. "He seemed so damn shore you was the one he seen there on the trail, that I thought he must be right."

"Hey—what comes off here?" cried the guard. "By God, he's the fella, all right! What you turnin' him loose fer? I got a good look at him—an' I'd never fergit that face to the longest day I lived!"

DOWNEY shook his head. "It was someone else you seen. Someone that prob'ly looked like the doctor, here. But it wasn't him. It couldn't of be'n. He ain't got no scar on his index finger—an' his prints ain't nothin' like the ones the robber left on the bar, an' the tin, an' the bottle."

"I don't give a damn about no finger prints!" the outraged guard cried. "By God, if I git a good look at a man, an' then he whams me over the head with a chunk of iron—I ain't fergittin' him none! Not by a damn sight, I ain't!"

"I don't claim yer forgettin'," Downey said. "But I do know yer mistaken. Like I said, the robber prob'ly looks like this man."

"An eyewitness can be mistaken. That's be'n proved in courts hundreds of times. But finger prints can't be mistaken. An' in the face of them prints, I'd be makin' a damn fool of myself if I was to take this man in."

"You'll be makin' a damn fool of yerself, if you don't," the guard retorted angrily. "He's the one that done it, all right. I'd swear to it on a stack of Bibles a mile high!"

"An' that jest goes to show that a lot of innocent folks has prob'ly be'n swore into prison on jest such evidence," Downey replied, and turned to the doctor. "You're lucky that crook left them finger prints

around. On this man's evidence, you'd be'n convicted shore as hell."

The doctor smiled. "I'm lucky that an intelligent officer is handling this case. A man with less acumen and experience might well have overlooked those prints, or ignored them."

"We don't send out rookies on murder cases when we can help it," Downey said. "Fill 'em up. I'm buyin' a drink."

"No, no! The drinks are on me!" the doctor exclaimed, and motioned the guard to the bar. "And you, too. Step up and join us, my good man. I believe you are honest in your identification, and I—"

"You know damned well I am!" the man interrupted.

"As I was going on to say," the doctor replied evenly, meeting the glaring eyes squarely, "I bear you no ill will. Come on—have a drink with me."

"You go to hell!" the man blurted. "There ain't no man livin' kin wham me over the head one week, an' buy me a drink the next! Not by a damn sight, there ain't!"

The doctor shrugged, and reaching for the bottle, filled his glass. "Suit yourself," he replied indifferently. "I was just trying to show you I harbor no hard feelings. Drink up, men. Here's luck to you."

III

A FEW days after Downey's departure the doctor outfitted for another prospecting trip, and disappeared into the hills. The spring clean-up progressed apace, and some three weeks later, as Black John stepped into the saloon, one morning, Cush jerked his thumb in the direction of the huge iron safe.

"Guess you've got to make a trip down to Dawson," he said. "The boys has be'n fe'tchin' in dust every night till the safe's gittin' all clogged up."

The big man frowned. "Why the hell can't someone else take the dust down for a change? It's a hell of a chore—makin' that trip. Why pick on me, every time?"

Cush set out bottle and glasses. "You know damn well the boys wouldn't trust that dust with no one but you. Trouble is, John, they know yer honest."

Black John laughed. "The reputation for honesty shore is a draw-back at times."

"Huh. There ain't no danger of yourn ever hurtin' you none. Hell, everyone knows yer an outlaw. But the boys all knows, the same as Downey does—there's a damn sight of difference in outlaws."

One Armed John stepped into the saloon, crossed to the bar and ranged himself beside the big man, as Cush slid a glass toward him.

"They's a fella camped in Olson's old shack," he announced, reaching for the bottle. "Claims his name's John Jones. Looks like some damn chechako."

"Jones, eh? We seem to be threatened with an influx of Joneses," Black John said. "We circumvented the plethora of John Smiths by the adoption of the name-can. Can it be that styles in names change the same as in clothin'? Or is someone in Whitehorse tippin' off the unholy that the name of Smith is *de trop* on Halfaday?"

Cush scowled. "Does that mean we got to invent another name-can, same as we done fer Smiths? By God, if it does, you better fetch in another book when you go to Dawson to copy names out of! We used up all the names in that there hist'r'y book. An' there ain't only three more books on the crick—that there statue book you stole off'n that lawyer down to Dawson, that time, most likely ain't got no names in it. I got a hymn book an' a Bible that my fourth wife had. Them Bible names—there ain't no one but you could say most of 'em after we'd got 'em wrote down."

The big man grinned. "Let us hope that

the invasion of Joneses may be met without recourse to another name-can. Go ahead an' make up that pack of dust. If I've got to take it down I might's well get goin'."

AT OLSON's old shack, some few miles down the creek, he paused to chat with a hard-eyed man who was dipping a pail of water from the spring. "Figure on locatin' here?" he asked.

"Yeah, anyways till I kin look around a little. Looks like the place is abandoned."

"That's right."

"What's the matter? Wasn't the claim no good?"

"Well, fact is, no one ever worked it long enough to find out. Lots of 'em's moved in here from time to time—but damn few's ever moved out."

"How do you mean by that?"

"Meanin' that the former tenants, almost to a man, has either died, or got murdered, or hung—one of the three."

"Hung? What was they hung fer?"

"Oh, different things they done—er mebbe, didn't do. On Halfaday, under our skullduggery law, a sin of ommission may be fully as hangable as one of commission."

"You must be Black John Smith, ain't you?"

"That's right."

"Heard about you up to Whitehorse. Feller there tipped me off you boys up here is all outlaws. My name's Jones—John Jones," he added with a wink. "This feller says how the name of John Smith don't go no more up here. The Law got to crowdin' me too clost, back in the States, so I lammed out on 'em. S'all right if I hole up here fer a while, ain't it?"

"Oh, shore. What a man done before he come to Halfaday ain't no one's business but his own. After he gits here,

though, he's got to refrain from crime in any form—or get hung. Onct a man gets that principle firmly grounded an' lives up to it, he can stay here as long as he likes. If I was you, though, an' had any considerable amount of cash er dust on hand I'd deposit it in Cush's safe instead of cachin' it. Most of the boys wouldn't bother a cache—but there's no tellin' when some damn cache robber might show up.

"Oh, I ain't got nothin' anyone would bother about. I'm damn near broke."

"Okay. So long. I've got to be goin'. See you later."

UPON reaching Dawson, Black John deposited the dust in the bank, strolled over to police headquarters, drew up a chair, hoisted his heels onto the edge of Downey's desk, and filled his pipe. "How they comin'?" he asked. "Did you pick up that robber—the one you was huntin' on Halfaday?"

Corporal Downey scowled. "No. An' what's more, we've got another pay-roll robbery on top of that one—an' the same set of finger prints. The Amalgamated started a twenty-five-thousan'-dollar pay-roll to Squaw Crick. Thought they'd play smart, an' instead of sendin' the messenger out in the daytime with a guard, they slipped him out at night, alone. Couple of fellas found him next day, dead on the trail with his head stove in. I hustled out there—an' found jest exactly what I found on the Dredge Company job—an' empty peach tin, an' empty whiskey bottle, an' an iron bar—all with finger prints on 'em that jump right out at you—the same prints, with the scarred index finger. Seems like the damn cuss leaves 'em there a-purpose."

"Hum. That's fifty-five thousan' he's got away with, ain't it? The sum is worth contemplatin'. Looks like he goes in fer

cash instead of dust, eh?"

"Yup. So far, the messengers comin' in with dust from the workin's haven't be'n bothered."

"Bills is easier to pack, at that. He must be a pretty slick article. Either that, or a damn dumb one—leavin' them finger prints around. An' if he was that dumb, he'd made other miscues that you'd have picked him up on, before this. Maybe he's someone that feels sure you'd never suspect him. After all, you can't go around takin' everyone's finger prints. You might keep an eye out for scarred index fingers. You could do that without folks knowin' it. It would take time, though."

"Too damn much time—at the rate he's workin'. But you don't know the half of it. Here's a headache—if there ever was one! Ottawa says the man whose finger prints these are is dead!"

"Dead!" Black John exclaimed. Then threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Hell, Downey, that simplifies yer case immensely. It eliminates the livin'. All you got to do, now, is hunt for a ghost—an' there's damn few ghosts."

"Laugh if you want to," Downey replied glumly. "I can't get no laugh out of it."

"Mebbe there's some mistake—like their gettin' them prints mixed up, back there in Ottawa."

"No chanct. They've checked, an' rechecked. The man is dead, all right. He died in prison. There's no question about that. An' here's one fer the book—take this glass an' look at them prints. See that scar on the index finger? There ain't no mistake about that scar. But Ottawa says the guy didn't have any scarred finger. Their set of prints are identical, except fer that scar."

"Looks like yer case is gettin' easier, an' easier," the big man grinned. "The ghost hurt his finger after his demise—so

now you can eliminate all ghosts with sound fingers. There can't be no hell of a lot of sore-fingered ghosts runnin' around."

"Have all the fun you want," Downey growled. "An' then chaw on this one—this bird, Jack Brower, was a lifer who died suddenly in prison of a coronary thrombosis. He was fingerprinted when he was admitted to the prison, an' the prints show no scar. An' there's no record of any injury to his finger while he was there, although the prison doctor is supposed to record all injuries, sickness, an' such."

"His body was claimed by a brother, an' buried in a lot bought fer the purpose in a local cemetery. They've got the affidavit of the undertaker that the man was dead, an' affidavits of several witnesses to the burial. But the prison doctor who signed the death certificate can't be located, an' investigation uncovered the fact that Brower had no brothers, an' the guy that claimed the body has disappeared. An' on top of all that, they got a court order to dig up the body to check that scar with his finger—an' when they done it, all they got was an empty coffin! Can you tie that?"

"Jest crawled out of his grave, lock, stock an' barrel, eh? An' then hit out fer Dawson an' begun gatherin' in pay-rolls? Did Ottawa say what his specialty was, durin' his earthly sojourn?"

"Yeah, they sent us his record—robbery, armed—express an' bank jobs, mostly. Got sent up fer a robbery in Windsor where an express messenger got knocked off."

"What did he look like? Did they describe him?"

"Yeah—here's all the dope. Jack Brower—six foot two, black hair, V-shaped scar on his chin, thirty-two, liked the women—but never touched booze. Hawk-bill nose. Slight squint in the left

eye. No one like that showed up on Halfaday, has there?"

"Nope. If he does I'll shore as hell keep an eye on him. We don't want no damn skunk on the crick that's liable to bash our heads in with a crowbar. Well, good luck to you. I'll be trottin' along an' see if I can't stir up a stud game. Pullin' out in the mornin'. I'm shore glad I ain't a policeman.

"By the way, Downey—if you should happen to grab off this here ghost—what you goin' to keep him in? If a coffin an' six foot of dirt won't hold him, he'll filter out through them cell bars of yours like water through a sieve."

"Get to hell out of here! I've got to catch him before I worry about holdin' him. An' don't be surprised if I show up on Halfaday agin before long. I've got a hunch it wouldn't do no harm to ask that doctor a few questions."

"Hell, Downey—he don't look no more like this Jack Brower than I do!"

"No. But he's a doctor, ain't he? An' accordin' to Ottawa there's a doctor somehow mixed up in this business. Some kind of shenanigan went on down there, you can bet yer life on that. An' any stray doctors that shows up in the Yukon are shore goin' to answer a few questions—an' they better know the answers!"

IV

AT NOON the next day Black John disembarked in his canoe from the upriver steamboat at the mouth of the White River and began the laborious upstream grind. After supper that evening he filled his pipe and sat staring into the glowing embers of his dying fire as he strove to make sense out of the facts Downey had given him. He spoke half aloud, as is the wont of lone men. "Doc is guilty as hell, all right. After he pulled out

on that second prospectin' trip I looked in his cache agin, an' that thirty thousan' the Yukon Dredge lost was in there, along with the eighty thousan' he had when he come. An' I'm bettin' when I look in it next time, I'll find the Amalgamated's twenty-five thousan' there too. An' finger prints, er no finger prints, that guard shore knew what he was talkin' about when he identified him.

"Doc's got plenty of guts, all right—the way he defied that guard to his face without battin' an eye. He's a damned cold-blooded murderer. But how the hell does he get away with them finger prints? An' where does this Jones that's holed up in Olson's old shack fit into the picture? I've got a hunch his showin' up on Halfaday so close on the heels of Doc ain't no coincidence—by a damn sight.

"Yet, neither one of 'em answers the description of this Jack Brower, either. An' where does Brower fit in? It's a cinch he ain't dead, or he couldn't be leavin' his finger prints around on peach tins an' crowbars an' whiskey bottles fer Downey to find. That undertaker an' them witnesses was ondoubtless greased plenty to swear to them affidavits. No wonder they've got Downey runnin' around in circles."

Suddenly he jerked the pipe from his mouth and slapped his thigh with his palm. "By God, I've got it! Or part of it, anyhow. Doc signs a fake death certificate an' gets Brower out of the pen. Then they hit out for the Yukon, an' Doc shows up on Halfaday—but Brower don't. Doc's got him hidout somewheres. When they pull off a job, Doc does the work, while Brower lays back, an' when it's over, he slips in an' gets his hand sticky with peach juice, an' then handles the tin, an' the bottle an' the crowbar. That accounts for the finger prints that knock hell out of any eye-witness identification—an' the reason

his new prints show a scar is because he's hurt a finger since he got out of the pen. That don't account for John Jones—but we can ondoubtless 'tend to his case later. Doc's got to be put out of circulation before he murders some other pore devil. But the hell of it is, Downey can't never convict him until he locates Brower so he can account for them finger prints. An', after him fixin' up Red John an' Short John the way he did, I'd have a hell of a time tryin' to convict him in miner's meetin' on some kind of skullduggery charge because the boys wouldn't never vote to hang him.

"Of course, if worse comes to worst, when Downey comes along I could show him Doc's cache, an' he'd have him dead to rights. In that case I'd have to forego any profit on the venture—but by God, I'll do it before I'll leave him runnin' loose to murder another pay-roll messenger, profit, er no profit! In the meantime I'll lay back an' let nature take her course. Mebbe I can locate this Brower, myself."

EARLY one morning several days later as he shoved up Halfaday Creek, Black John beached his canoe at Olson's old shack. Smoke curled from the stove pipe and glancing through the window he saw Jones busy at the stove. Stepping to the near-by rock-wall, he smiled as he noted that the flat stone that had served many other sojourners in the shack as a cache cover was fitted snugly into place over the hole. Laying the stone aside he peered into the aperture and his eyes widened as they encountered the numerous packets of paper money. Hastily removing them, he uttered an ejaculation of surprise. "Good God—here's that eighty thousan' Doc had in his cache—an' the thirty thousan' dredge company pay-roll—an' shore as hell—here's the Amalgamated's pay-roll along with 'em!" He shook his

head slowly from side to side as he crowded the currency into his packsack. "The ways of these damn crooks is beyond my limited powers of comprehension," he muttered, as he replaced the stone as he had found it. "They double-cross one another without battin' an eye. Their duplicity is shore sad to contemplate." Stepping into his canoe he pushed on, landing a mile or so beyond to cache the packets of currency among the rocks, some distance back from the creek.

As he resumed his journey, he grinned. "I've got a hunch there's goin' to be repercussions of some kind shortly. If citizen Jones can show that he come by that hundred an' thirty-five thousan' honestly, he'll get every cent of it back. I'm no damn cache robber. But if he can't—if his title to it seems clouded or obscure, an' open to suspicion—he's goin' to get a lesson in rectitude that'll be good fer his soul. Besides which, I might be able to show some slight profit on the venture, myself."

An hour later he drew his canoe from the water at the landing, and entering the saloon, crossed to the bar where Cush was already setting out bottle and glasses.

"So you got back, eh? How's things down to Dawson?"

"Oh, about so-so. Downey's got another pay-roll robbery on his hands."

"An' I s'pose he'll be up here again huntin' the robber."

"Most likely. How's things on the crick? Has anything of note transpired during my absence?"

"If you mean has anything happened—there ain't. But somethin's apt to. I'm shore glad you got back."

"Yeah? What's on yer mind?"

"It's that there damn John Jones, he claims his name is, that moved into Olson's old shack. He ain't no one a man could trust. He don't never come up an'

mix with the boys of a night. An' twict, now, One Armed John's ketched him sneakin' around in the bresh near One Eyed John's cabin. The first time whilst Doc was still out in the hills, One Arm seen him sneakin' away from there, an' he's pretty sure Jones had be'n in the cabin. It was 'long about noon when One Arm 'seen him, an' knowin' that there eighty-thousan' was cached there in the cabin I worried about it all day, figgerin' to slip over there when night come, an' see if it was still in Doc's cache.

"But 'long about suppertime Doc come back. He come over here that night—an' bein' as he didn't put up no squawk about bein' robbed, I guess Jones didn't locate his cache. Couple days later, One Arm seen Jones agin, layin' in the bresh watchin' the cabin. That was two, three days ago, an' I tipped Doc off that someone was prowlin' around his place, an' sence then he's stuck clost to the cabin—ain't even be'n over here of an evenin'. What I want to know, ain't it some kind of skullduggery if a man sneaks around through the bresh, like that?"

"Well, bresh-sneakin', per se, ain't hangable. The question of intent would be the decidin' factor. I'd say that in the absence of an overt act, or of tangible evidence of criminal intent—"

"Listen here!" Cush interrupted testily. "I don't want to hear no sermon. All I asks is, kin we hang that coot, er can't we? He don't spend a damn cent in here hisself. An' on top of that, he's keepin' a good customer away, besides."

Black John grinned. "Hell, Cush—if we start in an' hang everyone who don't patronize yer bar, here, we'd—"

ONE ARMED JOHN, his eyes staring wildly, burst into the room. "Hey—down to One Eye's shack! Doc's dead! He's murdered somethin' awful!"

Black John filled a glass Cush slid across the bar, and handed it to the man who brought up panting beside him. "Throw this into you an' get holt of yerself," he said. "Take yer time, now—an' tell us what you know."

The man gulped down the liquor. "It's Doc! He's deader'n hell!"

"Yeah—you told us that. S'pose you start at the beginnin'. How come you know he's dead?"

"I gits up this mornin' an' I ain't feelin' so good—like it's my guts er somethin' that's ailin' me. An' I figgers how mebbe Doc might fix me up, so I goes down to One Eye's shack an' knocks on the door. No one don't answer, an' I pounds some more, but it don't do no good. So I shoves the door open an' sticks my head in, an'—oh God, it's somethin' awful in there! Doc's layin' there dead on the floor, with his feet tied together, an' his arms tied tight to him, an' his shoes an' socks is off, an' his feet's be'n burnt, an' a rag's tied over his mouth! So I slams the door shet an' comes hell-bent up here! It's that damn John Jones done it, all right. I ketched him sneakin' around there a couple of times. I'm shore glad yer back, John—'cause now, by God, we kin hang him!"

"The facts calls for an investigation," Black John said. "I'll go an' look things over. An' don't neither one of you say a damn word to anyone about what come off. If John Jones shows up, throw a gun on him, an' hold him here till I get back."

As he neared One Eyed John's cabin the sound of feet thudding the trail from down the creek reached his ears, and he stepped aside into the brush. A moment later, Jones dashed into sight, and as he reached the spot, Black John stepped directly in front of him, blocking the trail, "What's yer hurry?" he asked, as the man halted abruptly.

"Hurry! By God, I be'n robbed! That's what's my hurry!"

The big man eyed him coldly. "Yeah? Robbed of what?"

"Of what was in my cache—that's what!"

"That oughtn't to worry you much. Only a couple of weeks ago you told me you didn't have nothin' of any value—an' you couldn't have taken a hell of a lot out of that old claim of Olson's sence then."

"I lied when I said I didn't have nothin'! I didn't figger it was any of your business what I had. What the hell do you think I come up here fer—my health? I pulled off some damn big jobs back there in the States—an' I fetched in the stuff with me—a hundred an' thirty-five grand in good cash money—that's what I had. An' now it's gone—every damn cent of it!"

"Tough luck!" Black John said. "Remember, I warned you about leavin' anything of value layin' around. I told you you'd better deposit it in Cush's safe."

"Yeah—an' you said there wasn't no crime allowed on the crick, too. Robbery's a crime, ain't it? What you goin' to do about it?"

"Do about it? Why, we're goin' to hang whoever is guilty—same as we always do."

"You got to ketch him first."

"Yeah, there's that angle, too. But that don't bother us much. If a man commits a crime on Halfaday, he always gets hung. Come on along with me. I've got a little chore to do, down here a piece. I figure you might be able to help me. Then I'll get to work on your case."

"What kind of a chore? Hell, we ort to go huntin' that robber 'fore he gits plumb away."

"He ain't likely to. Step on ahead. I'll foller." A short distance farther on Black John spoke again. "Turn off to the left.

We're goin' over to that cabin, yonder."

The man halted abruptly and faced about. "What—what you goin' there fer?"

Black John noted that the man's face had gone white, and that the words came haltingly from between tight lips.

"Oh, jest a little routine chore. Fact is, a man was murdered in there—sometime durin' the night, most likely. An' I want to sort of look around a little. Like I said, no one can commit a crime on Halfaday an' get away with it."

"Listen," the man said, wetting his dry lips with his tongue. "I—I don't want to go in there. I hate to look at dead men—gives me the creeps. I'll go up to the saloon an' wait around till you git through."

Black John shrugged. "Suit yerself. You've asked me to help you locate the man you claim robbed yer cache—an' I've asked you to help me out down here first. If you ain't willin' to help me, I won't go out of my way to help you—that's a cinch. An' without my help you ain't got a chance in the world of locatin' that cache robber. I ain't lost no hundred an' thirty-five thousan' dollars—but if I had, I'd shore as hell want all the help I could get to recover it."

For a long moment the man stood undecided, his hands slowly opening and closing. "All right, then," he blurted suddenly. "I'll go along with you. But, fer Pete's sake make it snappy. If the man's dead, like you claim, it hadn't ort to take no hell of a while to look around."

Opening the cabin door, Black John motioned the other to precede him. The man hesitated, drew slightly back, then with a visible effort, crossed the threshold and stepped aside to allow the big man to enter.

Hardened as he was to scenes of violence, Black John involuntarily shuddered at the sight that met his eyes.

The doctor lay on his back on the floor, his legs and arms tightly bound with babiche line. A sleeve ripped from a shirt covered his mouth, and was knotted at the back of his head. On the floor was a pool of thick, sticky blood that had oozed from his bashed-in head. A bloody hand-ax lay close by where the murderer had tossed it. As One Armed John had said, the feet of the corpse were bare, the skin blackened and shriveled in spots. Close beside them a half burned candle protruded from the mouth of a bottle.

For long moments Black John stood there, his eyes taking in every detail of the macabre scene. Out of the tail of his eye, he noted that the other, his face paper-white, was staring down at the floor.

"Come over here an' take a look," the big man invited. "I've investigated quite a few murders, take it first an' last—but never as dirty a one as this."

"I—I can't look," the man gulped. "I'm sick to my stummick—an' I've got the shakes."

"You'll come over here an' get you an eyeful, like I said. You shore as hell ain't no help to me, standin' there shakin' yer buttons off. If I had as much as you have at stake, you bet I'd pitch in an' help."

"What—what you want me to do?" the other asked in a quavering voice.

"I want you to come over here where you can get a good look, an' remember jest what you see. Cush, he's the coroner. An' he'll want the testimony of two witnesses as to jest how things was when we got here.

THE man edged closer, his eyes staring glassily, his hands trembling violently. Black John's voice boomed in a rumbling monotone, seemingly speaking more to himself than to the other. "Pore Doc, he hadn't be'n amongst us very long. But the boys all liked him. He was a

kindly soul—doctored 'em when they was ailin'; an' never charged 'em a cent. It's shore sad that a man like him should come to an end like this. Tortured, that's what he was. Look at them feet—burnt to a blister where the damn fiend that done it held the candle agin 'em. An' look how that line cut into his arms there, where he strained agin it. Tortured to make him tell somethin' he know'd, most likely. An' then—mebbe he wouldn't tell, an' the murderer got mad an' bashed in his head with the hand-ax, there. But the chances is he did tell—an' then the damn cuss bashed in his head, anyhow. Whoever done this ain't very far from here, right now. An' when the boys hears about it—an' has a look at what come off here, there's one murderer that ain't even goin' to get the benefit of a miner's meetin'. There won't be no quick jerk on the end of a rope fer him. They'll take matters into their own hands an' it's a safe bet that the damn dirty cuss will be as long dyin' as Doc was—mebbe longer—an' prob'ly a damn sight more painful. . . ."

"Shet up! Me, I'm gittin' outa here!"

"Not till you tell me what you done this for, you ain't," Black John said, in a hard, gritty voice, stepping between the trembling man and the door.

"I never done it!" the man cried, his voice rising to a hysterical falsetto. "It's a lie! I never seen this guy before!" His knees shook so violently that he suddenly collapsed onto the bench beside the table.

"That's lie, number one. But it ain't gettin' you nowheres. You was seen on two different occasions, prowlin' around this shack, keepin' an eye on Doc."

"It's a damn lie! It must of be'n someone else."

"Where'd you get the hundred an' thirty-five thousan' you claim was stole out of yer cache!"

"I fetched it in with me—like I said—

from jobs I pulled in the States.”

“Shore you didn’t get it out of the wall there, where Doc had it cached? You don’t need to answer that one. I’ll know in a minute, as soon as I look in the cache. You see, I happen to know that’s the exact amount he had in there—eighty thousan’ he fetched in with him, an’ fifty-five thousan’ he gathered in sence.”

The man’s eyes flickered. “It’s a damn—I mean—I—I lied. I never had no cache, with no one thirty-five grand in it.”

“Kind of a coincidence, ain’t it—you namin’ the exact amount Doc had in his cache? Do you still claim you never murdered Doc?”

“No, I never murdered him!” I tell you I never seen him before!”

Black John picked up the hand-ax from the floor. He grasped it by the bit, and pointed grimly to the bloody handle. “Okay. I’ll damn soon know whether yer lyin’ or not. The finger prints on this handle stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Finger prints!” the man cried, shrilly. “What do you know about finger prints?”

“I’ll know all about these—an’ yours, too, after I turn you over to the boys. As soon as I get out that powder Downey gave me, an’ my camera—an’ the ink pad, an’ get your prints—the boys won’t be very long makin’ up their minds who murdered Doc.”

The man leaned heavily against the table, his eyes staring straight ahead. “Don’t—fer God’s sake—don’t let ‘em torture me,” he whined, in a low, mewling voice. “I done it. I killed him—but he had it comin’ . You claimed he was a kind man—but I know he was nothin’ but a damn low-lived, dirty, double-crosser. He got jest what was comin’ to him fer what he done to Jack Brower.”

“Who’s Jack Brower? An’ what did Doc do to him?”

“He was a pal of mine, an’ Doc

murdered him! That’s what he done—double-crossed him an’ then murdered him. That’s where he got that eighty thousan’ he fetched in with him.”

“H-u-u-m. Go ahead an’ spill it—an’ it better be damn good to excuse a job like this.”

“Jack Brower, he’s in stir—see? Fer a job him an’ couple other fellas pulled off in Windsor—they throwed the book at Jack. Give him life, an’ ninety-nine years on top of it on a murder an’ robbery rap. Well, this here damn cuss was the prison doctor. He know’d Jack refused to tell where he had eighty grand cached outside. After Jack had be’n in a few years, an’ I seen how there wasn’t no chanct to crush out, this Doc, he puts a proposition up to him. He claimed he could spring Jack by givin’ him some drug—like knock-out drops, that would make him look like he was dead—an’ he’d sign the death certificate, an’ Jack he could git some pal to claim his body. Then he’d fetch Jack to agin, an’ they’d go fifty-fifty on the eighty grand.

“Jack he thinks it over an’ figgers it’s his only chanct, so he says okay. Then the Doc he tells Jack he’s got to tell him where the cache is at before he springs him, figgerin’ Jack might double-cross him when he got out. But Jack, he holds back on it, figgerin’ the same way about Doc. Doc he keeps at him, p’intin’ out that he might’s well take a chanct, bein’ as the eighty Gs wouldn’t never do him no good, on account they got his sentence so high he can’t never come up fer parole er pardon. Doc he swears he’ll play square, an’ finally Jack tells him where the stuff is cached, an’ Doc goes an’ gets it.

“Jack, he sends fer me, an’ spills the whole scheme, makin’ me promise to keep cases on Doc, an’ knock him off if he tried to pull a fast one. An’ seein’ how there’d be eighty grand in it, I agrees. Well, Doc

he don't dast to set back an' not do nothin', er Jack would sing about him coppin' off the dough—so one night, he slips Jack this here drug, and Jack takes it—an' a couple of minutes later he's deader'n hell. Then Doc signs the death warrant, an' I claim the body, an' we git holt of an undertaker an' have it buried in a lot Doc bought fer it.

"I hit Doc fer a cut on the eighty Gs, figgerin' that when he shelled it out, I'd knock him off, an' cop it all—fer what he done to pore Jack. But the damn cuss give me the slip. I follered him to Seattle, an' clean on through to Whitehorse. There a guy tipped me off that he'd hit fer here. So I come on up here—an'—well—I guess you know the rest. What I mean, that damn skunk got jest what was comin' to him."

Black John nodded, thoughtfully. "On the whole, I'm inclined to agree with you. But on the other hand, your ethics is open to question, too. Like I said, the boys here on the crick feel kindly toward Doc, an' I couldn't answer fer their reactions on his murder, even with the mittigatin' circumstance you've mentioned. If you was to stay on the crick, the least you could expect would be a quick hangin'.

"In view of the facts you've stated, personally, I'd be inclined to sort of play one murder agin the other, an' slip you enough grub so you could cross the line, an' reach the Tananna. An' yet, on the other hand, if you don't stay here, how could you expect to locate that hundred an' thirty-five thousan' you stole out of Doc's cache?"

"To hell with that hundred an' thirty-five Gs! There's more where that come from—but I ain't only got one life!"

"That seems a sensible way to look at it," the big man admitted. "We'll slip around to my shack an' you can get goin'. The quicker the better—before the boys

get holt of what come off here."

As the man was about to depart, Black John asked. "By the way—are you dead shore this Jack Brower was dead when you buried him?"

"Dead! Yer damn right he was dead! I know, 'cause I helped the undertaker lift him into the coffin."

BLACK JOHN returned to One Eyed John's cabin, and gazed down at the corpse with puzzled eyes. "Downey claims the authorities dug up Brower's coffin an' found it empty. No one else would dig up a dead man. So Jones was either mistaken, or he was lyin', when he claimed Brower was dead. An' besides that, a dead man can't be runnin' around the country leavin' his finger prints on peach tins, an' booze bottles, an' crowbars. Therefore, he must be alive. Alive, an' playin' with Doc. He's hidin' out somewheres, an' when they pull off a job, Doc does the work, then Brower slips in an' leaves his finger prints for the police to find. Then, if someone happens to get sight of Doc—like that guard did—an' identifies him, the police will turn him loose when they take his prints—jest like Downey did, there in the station.

"It's a damn slick racket, all right. But where the hell is Brower?" Stooping, he ran deftly through the dead man's pockets, in the hope of finding some memo, or notation that would reveal the accomplices whereabouts. In an inner shirt pocket he withdrew a small oiled silk bag. Opening it, he pulled out and unrolled an object so bizarre—so gruesome that he involuntarily drew back, dropping it to the floor. He stared down at it for a moment, then gingerly, he picked it up and examined it—*the skin of a human hand!*

Beautifully tanned, it was soft and pliable as silk, yet tough as good leather—a perfect glove that reached well beyond the wrist. Black John smiled grimly as his

eyes focused on the small slit at the tip of the index finger. "So," he muttered, "that's the scar Downey couldn't account for. Doc was prob'ly in a hurry when he skinned out Brower's hand an' his knife slipped. An' that's why they didn't find nothin' but an empty coffin when they dug into Brower's grave." Slowly, carefully, he drew on the glove, flexing his fingers, turning his hand this way and that to admire the fit. "Downey's goin' to be mighty interested in this," he muttered. Then paused abruptly, as a slow grin twisted the lips behind the heavy black beard. "But come to think of it, why bother Downey with trifles?"

Carefully he removed the glove and returned it to its oiled silk wrapping. "With Doc's ontimely passin' them payroll murders will cease, an' it won't hurt Downey none to be keepin' his eye peeled for the man with the scarred finger. Besides," he added, as he pocketed the small packet, "a man can't never tell when some odd relic like this might come in handy."

Returning to the saloon he faced Cush across the bar. "Well," the sombre-faced one asked, as he set out bottle and glasses, "what did you find out?"

"The facts are about as One Arm stated 'em. Accordin' to appearances Doc's demise is an undisputable fact, an' was accomplished with sadistic ferocity by—"

"If that means he's dead, One Arm told us that a'ready. What I mean—how about his cache?"

"Empty as a bar maid's promise!"

"Well, it was that damn John Jones done it, all right! An' now we kin call a miner's meetin' an' hang him. But first off, we'd better hit down to Olson's shack an' grab him before he gits clean off'n the crick with that there money Doc had!"

"There's no doubt in my mind that Jones is the culprit, an' that he richly deserves a good thorough-goin' hangin'. But I have my doubts as to his ability to leave the crick with Doc's wealth. You see, Cush, on my way down to Dawson, I stopped to chat with him for a few minutes, an' told him if he had anything of value he'd better deposit it here in the safe. He assured me that he had nothin' that anyone would bother to steal. So on my way back this mornin' I took occasion to examine his cache, jest by way of verifyin' his statement. I found a certain discrepancy in his statement, in that the cache contained certain funds—packages of bills that had a strangely familiar appearance. It struck me that they greatly resembled the packets that I had previously seen in Doc's cache—so I removed them, and recached them, pendin' an investigation as to their rightful ownership."

Cush eyed the big man across the bar. "Yeah? Well, this investigation about rightful ownership has went about as fer as it needs to. Doc's dead—an' Jones will be as soon as the boys gits their hands on him. That leaves you an' me. I seen that pack of Doc's as quick as you did, that time he first come here. You told me yerself they was eighty thousan' in it, that time you looked in his cache. This here's a fifty-fifty proposition. So, when you fetch them bills in from where you cached 'em, I want my forty thousan'—an' not a damn cent less."

Blade John grinned into the sombre eyes. "Why shore, Cush—fifty-fifty's okay with me. You don't think I'd double-cross you, do you? I'll fetch your forty thousan' in this evenin'."

