



DRY ROT

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*We Wonder If a Little Dry Rot Didn't Get into Black John's
Theory About Neither Helpin' Nor Hinderin' the Police*

I

BLACK JOHN SMITH finished cutting the meat from the carcass of a moose he had shot on the bank of the White River, a mile below a long and turbulent rapid, as 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, packed it in sacks and stowed it in the canoe.

"There's six, seven hundred pounds of good meat," Black John estimated, as he cleansed his knife with handful of soggy snow. "That ort to last us quite a while."

"Spring kilt meat ain't got enough fat on it to suit me," Cush grumbled. "I like it better in the fall."

"Oh, shore," the big man agreed, "but this un wintered good."

"An' besides which," continued the lugubrious Cush, "what with the river high as it is we've got to pack it around them rapids, an' what with the trail all slushed up it's goin' to be a hell of a chore."

"Cripes, time we git supper et the slush'll be froze. There'll be a bright moon tonight. 'Tain't only a mile around the rapids an' we can make it in three trips easy. Then we'll slip up an' see old man Hizer. Pore old cuss, things ain't be'n goin' so good with him fer the last two, three years—what with bein' crippled up with rheumatism, an' all. We'll take him some fresh meat."

"Huh," grunted Cush, "the ornery old coot! He could starve an' it wouldn't be no more'n what was comin' to him."

Black John grinned. "Of course, if you

judge Hizer by the standards that obtains amongst the pious, a man would have to admit that the odds is agin him. Hizer ain't be'n no pillar of rectitude, anyways you look at him."

"I don't know nothin' about that," growled Cush, "but I do know that 'long as he run his tradin' post there at the head of the rapids he sold licker to the Siwashes, an' cheated 'em, an' married four, five of 'em, an' would git drunk an' knock hell out of 'em, an' cheated men out of their claims, an' stoled anything he could lay his hands on, an' kep' his place so damn dirty a white man wouldn't hardly go into it."

"Oh shore. I ain't citin' Hizer as an example of personal probity, nor yet as an apostle of cleanliness. To my certain knowledge he's be'n guilty of everything you mentioned, an' plenty more. But now he's reformed, we hadn't ort to ostracize him."

"Reformed hell! He ain't no more reformed than you be! He's crippled up so he can't get around, er he'd be jest as ornery as he ever was. If anyone else had the rheumatism as bad as what he's got it they'd be dead long ago. Trouble with Hizer is, he's so damn bad he's afraid to die."

"Anyhow," Black John replied, "he's old an' crippled an' friendless. Like you say there won't no white man go into his shack, an' even the Siwashes won't have nothin' to do with him. It ain't goin' to hurt us none to take him fresh meat. He prob'ly ain't had none all winter. I feel sorry for him."

"Anyone that would feel sorry fer him would feel sorry fer the devil!" Cush retorted. "But if yer hell bent on goin' up there, I'll go 'long."

THE Hizer trading post, never an imposing structure, presented a dismal picture as the two paused for a moment at the top of the bank that slanted steeply upward from the river. The softening effect of the moonlight served to heighten rather than to dispel the air of utter dejection that seemed to hover over

the place like a pall of evil. Snow had drifted deep against the door of the unused trading room and lay in a heavy, sodden mass atop the northern exposure of the roof, from the southern slope of which most of the tarpaper had long since been torn by the wind. Light showed in a dull reddish glow through the dirt-encrusted panes of the single window of the little room in the rear that served Hizer as living quarters.

"A dismal layout," Black John observed, "'n' a miserable way for a white man to end his days."

Cush nodded somberly. "Yeah, but Hizer's got it comin'. A man can't run no hell-hole like he done an' not pay fer it someway. I can't work up no sorrow for him."

The two advanced toward the building through the sodden, half frozen snow, trackless save for a trodden path to the woodpile. All about the doorway the snow was befouled with slop filth. Black John's knock was answered by a hoarse growl.

"Who's there?"

"It's Cush, an' Black John Smith."

"Wait a minute!" The words were followed by the rasping sound of a heavy bar being lifted from its brackets. The door opened and the two stepped into the foul air of the filthy interior. Hizer closed the door, dropped the bar into place, and hobbling to his bunk, seated himself on its edge. "Set," he invited, indicating a rude bench. "I allus keep the door barred. The damn Siwashes has got it in fer me sence I quit sellin' 'em hooch. I was their friend long as I'd sell it to 'em. They know I've got a little left, damn 'em! An' there's plenty of 'em that would sneak in here an' cut my throat to git it if I'd give 'em the chanct." He paused and pointed to a jug that stood on the table amid a litter of filthy dishes. "Rench out a couple of cups an' have a snort. A man ain't so bad off long as he's got a little licker left."

Black John declined. "No thanks, Hizer. Me an' Cush has jest et. I never could go no

licker on a full stomach. We knocked over a young moose a little ways below the rapids, an' we fetched you up a chunk."

The rheumy, drink-sodden eyes lighted at sight of the generous portion of meat that the big man removed from his packsack and placed on the table.

"By God, fresh meat'll go good!" Hizer exclaimed. "I ain't in no shape to hunt. Can't even git around to red up the shack. But come warm weather I'll be all right agin. I'll git me another klooch, an' stock up the post, an' git goin'."

Black John's glance swept the room where the only visible supplies were a half-emptied sack of flour, and a few tins of canned goods. "Have you got capital enough to start over?" he asked casually.

"No," Hizer admitted, "I ain't. But quick as it warms up the rheumatiz'll let up on me, an' I'll go down to Dawson an' stock up on credick. Hell, I've boughten enough stuff off'n them damn cusses down there so's they'll give me credick to start up on. By God, they gotta!"

"An' in the meantime," asked the big man, indicating the scanty store of supplies, "is this all you've got to live on?"

"Yeah, that's all I've got left. My dust's all gone, too. Easy come, easy go—what I allus claimed, an' I blow'd her in around Dawson an' Whitehorse. I've got one more jug of licker. But that ain't goin' to last long. I kin make out on the grub, all right. A sick man don't need no hell of a lot to eat. But it's goin' to go to be hell when the licker's all gone. It's the onliest kind of medicine does me any good."

"You tried any other kind?"

"Shore I have! I've drunk up a dozen bottles of pain-killer besides part of a bottle of stuff Father Cassatt give me. He come through here a while back on his way to Dawson an' I ax him if he'd fetch me a couple jugs of licker when he come back, bein' as I needed 'em fer medicine. Well, he stopped in agin on his way

back—an' you know what the damn fool done? Instead of licker, he fetched me a bottle of medicine which he'd got off some doctor! An' when I lit in on him fer not fetchin' no licker, he starts givin' me hell fer sellin' hooch to Siwashes, claimin' the hand of the Lord was on me fer the way I'd used 'em, an' a lot of guff like that, till I got mad an' told him to mind his own business an' git to hell outa there 'fore I blow'd his damn head off! An' he called me a blasphemous old retrobate, an' went off without leavin' me no licker—only the bottle of medicine. I tuk a couple of snorts of it, but it tasted like hell, an' didn't have no kick to it so I throw'd it away. What I claim, them damn missionaries does more harm than good in a country. How the hell do they expect a man to make a livin' off'n the Siwashes if he don't sell 'em no hooch?"

"I've be'n in business quite a while up on Halfaday," Cush said. "I ain't done so bad—an' I ain't never sold a drink to a Siwash yet."

"What I claim," growled Hizer, hobbling to the table and pouring himself a cupful of liquor, "a man's a damn fool to pass up a dollar, no matter how he gits it." He turned to Black John. "I got to have grub an' licker enough to last me till it warms up so I kin git to Dawson. That there York boat of mine. I rec'lect you wanted to buy her off'n me, four, five year back. She's a damn good boat—ain't be'n in the water fer the last three year. I ain't had no use fer her, what with bein' crippled up, an' all. An' I figger if I'll be needin' a York boat I kin pick me up another one down to Dawson. She's there in the tradin' room, all chocked up on the slides, ready to slip into the river. I give her a coat of paint three year ago, an' ain't used her sence. You'll find a lamp in there. Take a look at her, an' if you still want her, I might let her go."

Black John pushed open the door to the long disused trading room and lighting a kerosene lamp with a smoke-blackened chimney, inspected the boat. "What do you hold her at?" he asked, when he had returned

to the room.

"I give twenty ounces fer her. I figger she'd ort to be worth fifteen. Tell you what I'll do—you kin have her fer ten ounces in trade, if you'll deliver the stuff down here from Cush's—half grub an' half lick." "

"All right. It's a trade. Give me a bill of sale, an' I'll send the stuff down, with the onderstandin' that I can leave the boat where it's at till I want it. Make you yer list an' we'll be goin'. We want to ketch us some sleep."

"Shore you kin leave her there—an' to hell with a list. You know what a man needs in the way of grub, same as I do. Only don't go too heavy on the grub—I need that lick fer medicine."

II

ON THE morning after their arrival on Halfaday Cush scowled at the array of food and liquor Black John had selected from the storeroom and turned over to Red John and Long Nosed John for delivery to Hizer. "If you figger on gittin' all that stuff fer ten ounces, you've got another guess comin'," he said, stepping around from behind the bar, pencil and paper in hand. "It comes to twenty ounces," he announced, after checking and totaling the supplies, "so you better put the half of it back where you got it."

The big man grinned. "Hell, Cush, I thought you'd prob'ly take a half-interest in that York boat for them extra ten ounces."

"I don't want no half-interest in no York boat at no price. An' if I did, I could git it fer five ounces. Hizer offered it to you fer ten."

"Yeah, I know. The pore old devil was afraid to ask any more fer fear I wouldn't take him up—an' he's desperate in need of that stuff. Twenty ounces ain't too much to pay for a good York boat. If you don't want in on it I'll write the half of it off as charity. I feel kind a sorry fer the old man. He ain't never goin' to be in shape to open up his post agin—

an' he couldn't get credit in Dawson, if he was. He's on his way out."

"Yeah—an' the quicker he gits there the better," growled Cush. "Cripes, if I was huntin' a chanct to blow in ten ounces on charity, I wouldn't pick out no ornery old buzzard like Hizer. There's plenty of Siwashes in the country that needs it as bad as he does."

"Yeah, but them Siwashes are God's pore folks. Ain't that what Father Cassatt's always sayin'? An' God's missionaries are lookin' out fer them. But take Hizer—he's what you might call the devil's pore. An' there ain't no one to look out fer him—onlest it's some renegade like me. Jest charge the stuff up agin' me, an' then buy a drink."

Cush made an entry in his book, and set out bottle, glasses and the inevitable leather dice box. "I'll buy a drink if the dices says I do. Beat them three sixes in one," he added, rolling the dice onto the bar.

They were still busy with the dice box an hour later when a large man stepped into the room, closely followed by two others. They advanced to the bar where the large one swung a small but heavy pack to the floor.

"This here's Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday Crick, ain't it?" he asked. "An' I s'pose you're Black John Smith, ain't you?"

"Both guesses is right," Black John replied, "so, if you'll belly up to the bar, the house'll buy one."

"We heard about this place in Dawson," the large one continued, as Cush set out the glasses. "An' we figgered it was a good place to come."

"A lot of folks had figgered the same way," Black John observed, "an' a few of 'em was right."

"What do you mean—a few of 'em was right?"

"Meanin' that some of 'em is here yet—the ones that was smart enough to settle down an' work claims, an' mind their own business, an' become law-abidin' citizens of Halfaday."

"Law-abidin'—hell! Accordin' to what I we heard, yer all outlaws up here!"

"The report was ondoubtless more comprehensive than the facts warrants," replied Black John. "It's barely possible, of course, that at some time durin' their pre-Halfaday existence, the finger of suspicion might have p'inted toward some of the sterlin' characters that abides here. But—"

"What the hell you talkin' about?" scowled the other, filling his glass from the bottle that Cush shoved toward him.

"If someone knows a lot of big words, he's got to keep sayin' 'em so's he don't fergit 'em," Cush grunted.

"The thought I was strivin' to convey," Black John explained, "is that what a man done before he come to Halfaday ain't nobody's business but his own—an' the Law's. After he gits here, he can take his pick between stayin' moral; er gittin' hung. It's all the same to us."

"You mean you don't want no one pullin' off nothin' on the crick, eh? Okay. We got ourn. All we want is somewheres to lay low till the stink dies down. We seen an empty cabin five, six miles below here. How about us movin' in there?"

"That's Olson's old shack," Cush said. "It's onlucky."

"An' on top of its reputation for bad luck," Black John added, "it's situation is precarious in the extreme fer anyone who is bein' sought by the Mounted. An officer comin' up the crick couldn't help but—"

"An officer comin' up the crick!" exclaimed one of the men. "Accordin' to what we heer'd they didn't no police dast to show his face on Halfaday!"

"Yer information was faulty," Black John replied. "Corporal Downey frequently visits Halfaday in the course of his duty. Sometimes he locates his man—an' sometimes he don't. It's accordin' to how his luck's runnin'. On Halfaday, we don't neither help nor hinder the police."

"That's a hell of a note!" the large man exclaimed. "Downey's the one I'm most afraid of, 'cause he's the smartest one of the damn police. 'Course, we could lay in the bresh an' knock him off if he come prowlin' around."

"If you done that you wouldn't live long enough to make the effort worth yer while," observed Black John dryly. "Yer soul would be clamorin' at the gates of hell before Downey got cold."

"Where kin we go, then?"

"Well, there's Whiskey Bill's shack. It's up a small feeder above here. It don't lay no more'n a quarter of a mile from the Alaska line. If Downey should show up, you could slip acrost the line an' be safe from arrest without resortin' to murder."

"That sounds okay," the large man said, tossing a sack onto the bar. "Fill 'em up. I'm buyin' one. How do we find this here shack?"

"You can't miss it. Foller up the crick about four mile, an' turn up the first feeder that runs in from the north. The shack's about a mile up the feeder."

"How about a game of cards now an' then, if we was to slip down here nights? I see you've got tables here."

"Stud is a form of amusement that's favored on Halfaday. A man can find a game most any night."

"That's good. We'll prob'ly show up three, four nights a week. Then when things sort of quiets down, mebbe you an' me kin kinda git together an' figger out a couple of jobs, eh?"

"That's accordin' to what kind of a job you had in mind. I've got an inherent aversion to manual labor—"

"What the hell's that?"

"Jest some more big words," Cush said wearily. "He means he's lazy."

"I've got a couple of sweet jobs lined up on Bonanza," the large man continued. "It would take mebbe five, six good men to pull 'em. The Excelsior's strong room ort to be

good fer six, seven thousan' ounces, if we watch our chanct. An' we'd ort to do damn near that good at the Calumet."

"Sounds like important money," Black John admitted. "But I wouldn't care to embark on a venture of that magnitude with no punks."

"What do you mean—punks! By God, we ain't no punks—no ways you look at us! Didn't the three of us jest take the Monarch Development outfit, on Dominion, fer twenty-five hundred ounces? An' wasn't it me figgered it out? An' me that knocked off the watchman? An' went in an' got the dust whilst these boys stud lookout?"

The two others nodded agreement, as Black John remarked, "There ain't no call to get hostile. I jest said I wouldn't want to go into a thing like that with no punks—an' neither would you. Havin' satisfied myself that you ain't punks, it might be that we could work out somethin' later. But as you say, we'd better sort of let things quiet down before stirrin' up another stink along the river."

ONE morning, some three weeks later, old Cush folded the newspaper he had been reading, laid it on the back bar, and shoved his square-framed steel-rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead, as Black John stepped into the saloon. "I see by the paper," he announced, "where some fella claims that mebbe them Spaniards down there in Cuby never blow'd up that there U. S. battleship."

"Who done it then?" Black John asked, picking up the dice box and rolling the cubes onto the bar.

"He figgers some of the *Maine's* sailors might of been smokin' in the powder room. Er mebbe her b'iler busted."

"How could he prove it—with the ship on the bottom of the harbor? Beat them four treys in one."

"He don't claim he kin prove it. He jest says mebby. An' there's four fours to beat yer treys—an' three fives right back at you. But it

would be a hell of a note to start a war over somethin' that never happened."

"Never happened! Cripes, if you don't call blowin' up a battleship a happenin', what the hell would be one? Yer three fives is good. Shove out the bottle."

"He never claimed the ship never blow'd up—only that them Spaniards mightn't of done it. An' if they didn't, why should the U. S. start in an' knock hell out of 'em?"

"Mebbe jest on general principles," Black John said. "Most wars is fought over somethin' that could be settled in a couple of hours if a few right-thinkin' men was to set down to a table an' figger out the answer."

"Guess that's right," Cush admitted. "An' it looks like me an' you'd better do a little figgerin' before somethin' happens on Halfaday."

"What do you mean?"

"It's them three cusses up to Whiskey Bill's. I don't like their looks, nor nothin' else about 'em. They're be'n comin' down here two, three times a week an' settin' in the stud game, er else gittin' drunk with the boys. There ain't no harm in that, long as they deal honest an' pay fer their drinks. It might be a good idee to hang 'em. I've noticed 'em sort of lookin' around."

"Lookin' around ain't hangable."

"But what I claim, onct you hang a man, he ain't goin' to pull off nothin'. Them three's gittin' kinda thick with a couple other characters I wouldn't trust no hell of a ways—that there Jefferson Braddock, an' William Henry Van Buren. An' Short John is kinda mixin' with 'em, too. I ain't never suspicioned Short John before. But it's like the Good Book says, birds of a feather is apt to be tarred by the same bresh."

"Er words to that effect," grinned Black John. "But there ain't no cause to worry. The only thing them boys is plannin' is to knock you off an' raid the safe."

"Knock me off, an' raid on the safe! An' that ain't no cause to worry! How do you

know what they're up to?"

"That's what Short John reports. When I suspected that somethin' was afoot, I delegated Short John to horn in on it. Jest to make the play good, so they wouldn't suspect him, I lit into Short John a couple of weeks back, an' give him a hell of a bawlin' out where them boys could hear me. Then Short John throw'd in with 'em out of revenge. It's like this—if they can make a deal with me to pull off them Bonanza jobs, we'll clean them up first. After that they aim to tunk you on the head, raid the safe, an' slip acrost into Alaska. Or, if I don't throw in with 'em on them jobs—then they'll cool you an' raid the safe anyhow."

"You'd be a damn fool to throw in with 'em."

BLACK JOHN laughed. "Oh, I don't know. Accordin' to how that big one figgers, them jobs would run into important money. But if I don't throw in with 'em, an' they should make that play fer the safe, the enterprise will ondoubtedly wind up with a bunch of assorted hangin's."

"Look! Comin' in the door!" Cush exclaimed, as Black John turned to greet Corporal Downey of the Northwest Mounted Police.

"Hello, Downey! Welcome to Halfaday! Come on up an' wet yer whistle. Cush is buyin' one."

"Busy as ever, I see," grinned the officer, hoisting a foot to the brass rail.

"Oh, shore. But never so busy but what we can snatch a fleetin' moment in the interest of frivolity. Was you expectin', perchance, to accost one of the sinful amongst us?"

"Along about six weeks ago the night watchman on the Monarch Development Company's outfit on Dominion was knocked on the head with an iron bar, an' the strong-box robbed of twenty-five hundred an' ten ounces of dust."

"H-u-u-m. Better'n forty thousand dollars, eh?"

"That's right. There must have be'n at least two mixed up in it. The murderer must have had anyway one lookout. The watchman was still alive when the morning shift went on an' they hustled him to the hospital. I stopped in there, but he was unconscious, an' along about ten o'clock he died. The nurse claims he come to jest before he died an' sort of mumbled a pretty fair description of the one that slugged him."

"Did you find the bar he was slugged with? Was there any fingerprints on it?"

"I found the bar, all right. An' the one that used it handled it with his bare hands. But he didn't leave no prints that ain't all blurred up, like he let the bar slide through his hands when he throw'd it away. He was lucky. If it wasn't for that description we wouldn't have a damn thing to go on."

"What did he look like?"

"Accordin' to what the nurse wrote down, he was a big man—six foot, er better. He's dark complected. Thin hawk nose with heavy black eyebrows that run together acrost the top of it. An' a thin-lipped, mean-lookin' mouth. Has anyone like that showed up on Halfaday?"

"Yup. Him an' his two helpers. They're up in Whiskey Bill's old shack."

Downey frowned. "Whiskey Bill's! Hell, that's acrost the line! I'd have to have papers to go after him there."

"What makes you think it's acrost the line?" Black John asked.

"Why, you told me so yourself! That time them two chechakos shot it out after one of 'em draw'd a mustache on the picture of the other one's girl. One of 'em got shot in the leg, an' you an' Cush cut it off. Then I came along an' was gain' to arrest the one that done it for assault with a dangerous weapon—an' you told me the shack was on the Alaska side, an' I didn't have no jurisdiction."

Black John grinned broadly. "Oh—yeah. You mean that time, eh? Well, Downey, that kid wasn't rightly to blame fer that shootin'. It was a case of two chechakos winterin' together till their nerves got all jangled up, an'—"

"I don't give a damn, now, about the merits of that case. What's botherin' me is that Whiskey Bill's shack, where these damn murderers are holed up, is on the Alaska side."

"Seems like yer sort of jumpin' at conclusions, as a lawyer would say. The fact is Whiskey Bill's shack ain't on the Alaska side—an' ain't be'n sence the earthquake."

"Earthquake! What earthquake?"

"Hell—there ain't but one earth!"

"That's right," Downey grinned, "an' this part of it ain't quaked—that I ever heard of."

"It might not have quake down around Dawson. But it shore as hell done some jumpin' around up here."

"When was this earthquake s'posed to have come off?"

"When? Did you say 'when,' Downey? Well, let's see—near's I can rec'lect, now, it was a year ago, come St. Swithin's Eve."

"When in hell is St. Swithin's Eve?"

"Cripes—don't the police know nothin'? St. Swithin's Eve is the night before St. Swithin's Day, which is one of them standard dates—like Chris'mas, or Fourth of July, or Queen's Birthday."

"What's all this got to do with Whiskey Bill's old shack?"

"The main thing that earthquake done was to shift the shack's jurisdictional status. You see, Downey, that quake shoved that whole feeder, crick, shack, an' all about half a mile this way. So now the shack lies a good quarter of a mile this side of the line."

Corporal Downey chuckled. "You would not lie to me, John?"

"Me! Lie! Hell, no! Anything I tell you, Downey, is as near the truth as the exigencies of the case warrants. Of course, you've got to allow for a reasonable margin of error—sed

margin bein' a variant, as a mathematician would say. Meanin' it's sometimes so narrow as to be practically nonexistent—but always remainin' in inverse ratio to the merits of the case, as I see it."

Behind the bar, Cush snorted, and refilled his glass. "By God, there's one thing about John—any damn lie he tells, by the time he gits through with all them big words, it somehow sounds kinda reasonable!"

"So, you think I'd better go up to Whiskey Bill's, eh?"

"Hell, no! There's three of them birds up there, an' they're plenty *kultus*. They've got rifles, an' when they was figurin' on movin' into Olson's old shack, they expressly stated that if you, or any other policeman showed up they'd knock you off. That's the reason I steered 'em up to Whiskey Bill's. If you was to show up on that crick, chances is they'd pot you without givin' you a break. Of course, we'd hang 'em for it. But from your angle, it wouldn't be so good."

"I don't give a damn if there's three of 'em up there—or a dozen!" Downey exclaimed. "You don't expect me to stand here an' let—"

"I don't expect you to stand here an' let yer guts run away with yer brains, if that's what you mean," Black John interrupted. "Let's look at it reasonable. You want to arrest these birds fer that Dominion job. An' we shore as hell don't want no sech characters on Halfaday. Them three is habited to come down here three, four nights a week to get drunk er play stud, as their conscience dictates. So all you've got to do is to combine the minimum of effort with the maximum of safety by waitin' right here where you'll have the drop on them, instead of goin' up to Whiskey Bill's, where they'd have the drop on you. Are you shore you've got a good iron-clad case agin 'em?"

"Well—we've got that watchman's description of one of 'em. There's nothin' at all on the others—unless the killer should squawk."

Black John poured a drink and watched the little beads rise and rim the glass. "Yer case ain't none too strong, hangin' as it does on words mumbled to a nurse by a man that's now dead. This man only seen the killer onct, an' it was in the dark. You can see what the defense lawyer will do with that. An' if them three stick together on an alibi, they'll all go free."

The officer nodded. "That's true. But that's the way it is—unless some further evidence turns up. If I could recover the dust it would put the case on ice."

"It ain't likely you could," Black John opined. "Damn scoundrels like them would prob'ly cache it where no one could find it. Even if you did get holt of it, they could claim they got it somewheres else. Dominion Crick gold ain't no different from the gold on a lot of other cricks."

"Guess that's right," Downey admitted, glumly. "But I'm takin' 'em back to Dawson, jest the same."

Black John cleared his throat. "You know, an' I know, an' any right-thinkin' man would know that them three damn cusses needs hangin', if ever anyone did. Ignorin' the robbery—which I can't seem to work up no personal sorrow over—murderin' a man with an iron bar is a damn dirty trick. An' not only they done that, but they bragged about it!"

Downey nodded. "You bet it's a dirty trick! An' I'll see that they swing for it if I can."

"Shore you would. But with the case you've got, the chances is, you can't. I've b'n doin' some thinkin', an' if you'll listen to me, them birds will get their hangin'—an no chanct to wiggle out of it."

"I won't stand for any manufactured evidence," Downey said.

"Hell—you nor me neither! The evidence we'd have would be A-Number-One, an' so onassailable an' pristine pure it would hang a saint. Word has reached my ears that them three are right now plottin' to knock Cush off

an' raid the safe, thus bein' guilty of conspiracy—a crime that's plenty hangable, on Halfaday. So, if you'll turn around an' hit back fer Dawson—"

"Nothin' doin', John," Downey interrupted. "I'm takin' 'em back. You never can tell about a jury. I might get a break of some kind. I will take your advice, though, about waitin' for them birds to show up here. Fact is, I'm kind of pooped out. We've be'n busy as hell down on the river, an' I ain't be'n sleepin' none too good lately."

"Slip over to my cabin an' roll in," Black John advised. "I'll tip you off when they get here."

IV

A COUPLE of hours later a man stepped, rifle in hand, from behind a tree a short distance up the feeder upon which Whiskey Bill's shack was located to greet Black John with a grin. "We've be'n wonderin' how long it would be 'fore you come up to talk things over," he said. "I kep' tellin' the boys you was waitin' till the stink blow'd over down along the river. You figger it's time we was gittin' busy on them Bonanza jobs, eh? Come on up to the shack, an' we'll dope it out."

Black John fell in beside the large man whose description Downey had just given him. "It looks like we'll have to hold off on them jobs fer a while yet," he said. "What I come up for is to warn you boys that the Law showed up, this mornin', at Cush's. It's Corporal Downey, an' he's huntin' the ones that pulled off that Dominion Crick job."

The other broke into a tirade of curses, and was still going strong when they arrived at the shack. "The Law's showed up," he informed his confederates. "We've got to pull out."

"Where the hell kin we go?" asked one of the men. "We ain't got grub enough to hit out into Alaska!"

"That's right," the large man agreed, and turned to Black John. "How about you slippin'

us some grub from Cush's?"

"No chanct. Downey'd spot me in a minute, an' follow me up here."

"Let him faller you, then!" the large man exclaimed, fingering his rifle. "By God, you'd be the last man he'd ever foller! An' damn good riddance!"

Black John shook his head. "Like I told you we don't want no policeman killed on Halfaday. It would make it mean fer all of it us. Fact is, I done some figgerin' while I was comin' up here, an' I believe I doped out a scheme that'll work. Downey's got a damn good description of the one that done the killin'. It's you. That watchman got a good look at you just before you slugged him, an' before he died the next mornin' in the hospital, he come to long enough to describe you to the nurse. An' believe me, he got you right down to a gnat's hind leg. Downey asked me an' Cush if anyone answerin' that description had showed up around here—but he didn't get no satisfaction out of us.

"It's like this—he's only got the description of one of you. An' that description is only the say-so of one man—an' a dead man, at that, who only got one quick look at you—an' in the dark. Besides which he wasn't no more'n half-conscious when he mumbled it to the nurse. Think what a good defense lawyer would do to that! As far as the police knows it was a one-man job, though Downey figures there was prob'ly a lookout er two. So if these two boys, here, was to swear you an alibi the Crown Prosecutor wouldn't have no more case than a rabbit. You could swear that you was all three right here on Halfaday on the night of the robbery—an' if there was enough in it to make it worth my while, I might even swear to the same thing—makin' the alibi practically iron-clad. In that way you'd beat the case, an' we'd be free to go ahead with them Bonanza Crick jobs, if we was so minded."

"By God, John, yer a wonder!" the large man cried, slapping the other a resounding

thump on the back. "We've as good as got the case beat a'ready! We'll pay fer the alibi, all right! How does a hundred ounces strike you?"

"The price seems fair an' reasonable," Black John agreed. "I wouldn't want to seem hoggish, nor to have you boys think I'd take advantage of you."

"Oh, we ain't afraid of that," the large man grinned, "Anyone would have to git up damn early in the mornin' to take advantage of us. It's a deal, then?"

"It's a deal." Black John extended his hand palm up. "All I'm askin' is that the hundred ounces be paid in advance."

"You mean—now?"

"Well. I wouldn't see no p'int in dillydallyin'."

"We ain't got that much on us. We'll have to git it out of the cache. You don't need to worry. We're honest men. We pay our debts. So you figger we'd better leave Downey arrest us, an' then beat the case, eh?"

"That looks like your best bet. Come down to Cush's tonight, like you've be'n doin'. Downey'll be there, an' when he arrests you, jest gives yerselves up without makin' no trouble—except to squawk like hell an' claim you ain't never be'n on Dominion in yer life. Tell him you've be'n right here on Halfaday fer the past three months. But before you go into the saloon be shore to deposit them hundred ounces in an empty tin can you'll find settin' clost agin the wall at the northwest corner of the storeroom. It ain't that I'm doubtin' yer honesty. But likewise I ain't takin' no chances on yer forgetfulness. A mere formality—yet one that had ort to be complied with—bein' as you wouldn't have no chanct to slip me them ounces onct you got inside."

"The dust'll be there. Don't worry."

"I ain't worryin'. I know you boys wouldn't double-cross a friend—when that friend could swear a rope around yer necks as easy as I kin. An' by God, I jest happened to think of somethin' else! A man might's well

make all he kin out of a proposition. What I claim, a man's got to be thrifty to git along. There's three of you boys, an' that's more'n Downey can handle in a canoe. I'll get him to deputize me to help take you down to Dawson. That way, I'll get my expenses paid fer goin' down to the trial an' back—an draw wages, to boot. How's that fer playin' both ends agin the middle?"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the large man. "Yer all right, John! What I mean—with a head like you've got, we're goin' places!"

"That ain't no lie," Black John agreed. "An' the quicker, the better—what I mean."

INSTEAD of returning directly to Cushing's Fort, Black John slipped around and watched from a place of concealment among the rimrocks as the men visited their cache to get the hundred ounces with which to pay him. Arriving at the fort, he found Cush alone in the barroom.

"Where's Downey?" he asked.

"Over to your place ketchin' him some sleep, like you told him, I guess." Cush answered, setting out a bottle and glasses. He frowned as Black John poured a drink. "Even ornery as them three damn cusses is, John, I don't see no call fer you to tip Downey off to 'em. After all, arrestin' folks is the police's job—not ours. It wouldn't look so good to the boys here on Halfaday if they found out we was playin' in with the police."

"You don't need to worry about me violatin' no ethics, Cush," the big man replied gravely. "What I claim, if a man don't stand squarely upon his ethics—where is he? Where is he, I say?"

Cush fidgeted a bit and mopped at the bar with his rag. "Why—why, I don't know, John. Right here, I guess. I don't rightly know what a ethic is. I never seen none. An' I know damn well I ain't never stood on none. All I says—I don't see no call fer you to be tippin' folks off to the police. We could hang them boys when the time comes, ourselves."

"It's true, I done Downey a good turn by tippin' them boys off to him. But I balanced the book by slippin' up to Whiskey Bill's an' tippin' him off to them. I told 'em Downey had a damn weak case, an' advised 'em to show up here tonight an' let Downey arrest 'em. We shore as hell don't want 'em on Halfaday, plottin' like they be, to rob the safe. The way I figure it, we'll be shet of 'em, an' they'll beat the case in Dawson, an' Downey'll get credit fer arrestin' em—everyone happy, an' no one hurt."

"By cripes, John—I believe yer right! You do some damn funny things. But they gen'ly turn out all right—even if I do say it myself. How about that dust they got off'n that Dominion Crick job? What'll become of them ounces?"

"Well—off hand, I'd say that the disposition of them ounces is problematical."

"Huh. Does that mean you've got 'em, a'ready? Er, are you jest aimin' to?"

"That dust is ondoubtless cached where it would be damn hard to find. Scoundrels like them three would deposit their ill-gotten gains where no one would be apt to locate 'em—which is further proof of their onderhandedness. You got a needle an' thread? I bust a button off'n my shirt."

Cush stepped into his living room and returned with a basket which he set on the bar. "Help yerself," he said. "There's every damn thing in there a woman kin think of—buttons an' tape measures, an' needles, an' pins, an' spools of thread, an' God knows whatnot. I've be'n aimin to throw the hull damn mess in the stove, but I ain't never got around to it. It's some junk my fourth wife had."

Black John rummaged in the basket, found needle and thread and a button which he sewed in place. As he returned the needle, he picked up a small pasteboard box. "What's in here?" he asked, idly fingering the box.

Cush took the box, opened it and disclosed a dozen or more small packets. "Oh, them's sleepin' powders that belonged to my third

wife. They musta got throw'd in there. She didn't used to sleep good—an' by God I wouldn't neither if I'd carried on with a B. and O. conductor like she done whilst I was on shift. She finally skipped out with him—an' good reddance. I'll throw 'em in the rences tub."

"Hold on! Sleepin' powders, did you say? Give 'em here. They might come in handy. Don't you rec'lect Downey was tellin' us how he ain't be'n sleepin' good, lately?"

V

WORD of Corporal Downey's appearance on the creek kept many of the regulars away from Cush's. So that evening only a thin sprinkling of customers lined the bar when the three men from Whiskey Bill's stepped into the saloon to be greeted by a brisk command, backed up by Downey's service revolver.

"Reach high, you fellows, an' reach quick! You're under arrest for the murder of John Hawkins, night watchman for the Monarch Development Company, on Dominion Creek. An' it's my duty to remind you that anything you say may be used against you."

The large man retorted with a sneering laugh. "The hell you say! Well, copper, you kin put up yer gun. We ain't nothin' but common prospectors, an' we ain't heeled. An' what's more, yer a damn fool if you think we murdered anyone on Dominion Crick, er anywheres else. So use that agin us, if you kin!"

"You can tell all that to the judge when the time comes," Downey replied, as he frisked the men for weapons. Finding none, he motioned them to chairs beside one of the card tables. "You can lower your hands now an' set over there where I can keep an eye on you."

"When was this here murder s'posed to be'n pulled off?" demanded the large man.

"About six weeks ago. I can't name the exact date without lookin' it up. What

difference does it make?"

"It makes a hell of a lot of difference, if you expect to hang it on us! Hell, we've be'n right here on Halfaday longer'n that!"

Downey grinned. "That ort to be a p'int in your favor, if you can prove it. You'll get the chanct to tell that to the judge, too."

Black John, who had stepped from the room as the others entered, returned with a hundred-ounce poke sagging his pocket, glanced at the three prisoners, and turned to Downey. "Find anyone that suited you?" he asked.

"Yeah. The big one there is the fellow I told you about. The watchman described him to a T. These other two come in with him an' I'm takin' 'em along. We know he must have had an accomplice or two."

"H-u-m. It's goin' to be quite a chore fer you to take the three of 'em back to Dawson alone, ain't it? 'Course, you could do it by linkin' 'em together an' goin' back afoot.

"But you could make the trip in half the time, an' a damn sight easier by canoe. Why not deputize me to help you take 'em down? You know damn well that here on Halfaday we don't neither help nor hinder the police to locate their man. But onct you've got 'em, I don't mind helpin' take 'em in. With two canoes we could make the trip in ten days."

"Why, sure, John. I'd be glad to do it that way. You're deputized."

"Okay," the big man replied, and turned to the prisoners with a scowl. "An' if you birds is contemplatin' any monkey business you better fergit it—if you want to hit Dawson in good health."

"You don't need to worry," the large man replied. "We don't aim to make no trouble. This damn punk ain't got nothin' on us. The quicker we git to Dawson, the quicker we'll git turned loose."

"In which case, I'll buy a drink," Black John grinned.

"We won't be pullin' out till mornin'," Downey said. "We'll have to take turns

standin' guard on these men tonight."

"Guard—hell! We'll stick 'em in the hole!"

"What's the hole?" the large man asked, a note of apprehension in his voice.

"It's a place we scooped out under the storehouse floor fer the purpose of detainin' sech characters as we deem in need of detention, ontill final disposal can be made of 'em. Once we've got a man in there, an' a bar'l of pork settin' on the trap door, we can forget him till he's needed."

"Don't we git in on the drinks?" asked one of the three.

"Oh, shore. We don't aspire to torture no one. Fetch over three good shots of licker, Cush. An' then we'll put these boys to bed."

"Hey," cried the large man, peering into the aperture that yawned in the floor of the storehouse, as the trap door was raised. "There ain't enough room fer three men in there!"

"W-e-e-l," Black John said, eyeing the pit, "mebbe not three fat men. But you boys ort to make it all right."

"Cripes," exclaimed one of the others, "there couldn't only one of us lay down!"

"Not to onct, mebbe," Black John admitted. "You can sleep in shifts."

"But how about air?" the large man cried.

"Hell, the hole's full of it! Divide it up amongst you. Come on—climb down there! Don't quibble!"

EARLY the following morning Black John lighted his fire, slipped out to the meat cache and returned with a couple of thick steaks which he laid on the table, then he awoke Corporal Downey. "You fry up them steaks," he said, "an' I'll slip over an' have Cush's klooch cook breakfast fer them three birds. We ain't got room enough to feed 'em in here. An' besides, Cush has got part of a tough hindquarter left he'll be glad to work off on 'em. This here's yearlin' meat, an' I hate to waste it."

Proceeding to the fort, he roused Cush, who grumblingly led the way to the bar room and set out bottle and glasses. The breakfast arrangements completed, Black John refilled his glass, and glanced across the bar. "You better git holt of One Armed John. An' tell him to have the boys show up here tomorrow night fer a miner's meetin'," he said.

"Miner's meetin'!" Cush exclaimed. "You won't be here! An' besides—who the hell would we hang?"

"Them three boys in the hole. That is, of course, in the event of their conviction by the miner's meetin' of conspirin' to knock you off an' rob yer safe. Short John has be'n in on their deliberations, an' he reported the scheme to me in all it's details—an' the hell of it is, it would prob'ly have worked. Besides which, the onmittigated scum had the effrontery to bribe me to perjure myself in their behalf at their trial."

"But hell, John—there won't neither you nor them be here! Downey claimed you two was pullin' out with 'em right after breakfast."

"Listen, Cush—you know an' I know that them three is guilty as hell of murderin' that night watchman. Not only they done it, but they bragged about it. If any three skunks livin' ort to be hung, it's them three. But they'll never be hung in Dawson. Downey ain't got evidence enough to convict 'em. Any defense lawyer would get 'em off in no time. That's the trouble with the law—the judge can know, an' the jury can know, an' the police can know, that a man's guilty as hell, but if the evidence they've got ain't jest so—they turn' em loose. There's certain rules that's be'n laid down—an' they've got to be complied with. A legal trial ain't nothin' but a game of chess between the lawyers—an' the prisoner ain't nothin' but a pawn. Innocent men gets hung, an' guilty ones turned loose, accordin' to which lawyer remembers the most rules to quibble over. On the contrary, our miner's meetin's is conducted with an eye to jestice. If a man needs hangin', by God, he

gits hung. He gets what breaks he's got comin'—an' no more."

"Shore, I know," Cush agreed. "But how the hell we goin' to hang 'em, if they ain't here?"

The big man grinned. "We could hang 'em *in absentia*, if—"

"Where the hell's Absentia? I never heard of it."

"It's jest one more of them legal fictions. It's a good way to git hung—from the hangee's angle. But we'll ignore it, as bein' inconclusive. The fact is, Cush, I've got a premonition that them three prisoners is goin' to escape from me an' Downey, an' hit back here. Them three sleepin' powders of yer third wife's give me a thought. So be shore an' have the boys here—an' you tell Pot Guttled John to have them three nooses ready. An' tell him I say to make a good workmanlike job on 'em, too. That last one he tied looked like hell. There ain't anything more annoyin' than to see a corpse danglin' around on a sloppy noose! I'll be gittin' back, now, before Downey burns them steaks."

VI

JUST on the edge of dark, the following evening, the two canoes bearing Corporal Downey, Black John, and the three prisoners beached at Hizer's old trading post at the head of the rapid on the White River. It had come off warm, a drizzling rain had fallen all day, and the river was running bankful with water from the melting snow.

"We'll camp here tonight," Black John said. "Hizer'll let us sleep in the old tradin' room. It'll prob'ly leak like hell, but we can find some dry spots to spread our blankets. It'll beat sleepin' out in the rain all night. We can take turns guardin' the prisoners."

"That suits me," Downey agreed. "I'll stay here while you go an' see Hizer—if he's sober enough to know what you're talkin' about. I stopped in for a minute, comin' up,

an' he was drunk as a boiled owl."

"Yeah, the pore old devil. He might well stay drunk till he dies—the shape he's in. Me an' Cush was here couple weeks ago an' I bought his York boat off'n him. Sent him down a bunch of stuff from Cush's to pay for it—half grub an' half lick. He ain't goin' to last much longer."

"It'll be a good thing for the country when he kicks out," grunted Downey. "It's damn cusses like him that raises hell with the Siwashes."

"Yeah—but he's past harmin' 'em now. It's got so he's afraid of 'em—keeps his door barred all the time. He thinks he's goin' to open up his post agin when warm weather comes. But I'm doubtin' he'll live that long. He likes me, all right. I give him twict what he asked fer his York boat. I'll go talk to him." Black John departed and returned shortly. "It's okay fer us to sleep in the tradin' room," he announced. "He even told me we could do our cookin' on his stove. But the way it stinks in there, an' the dirt, an' all, we're better off out here. He give me the key to the tradin' room, so while you rustle some wood, I'll onlock the door an' carry in the blankets, an' see if I can't find somethin' dry fer kindlin'."

After supper, hastily prepared over an open fire in the drizzle, the five entered the trading room, empty save for the York boat chocked on skids that slanted to the water, and a clattering of old barrels, boxes, and trash. Black John turned to Downey and pointed to a little room, the door of which stood open behind the empty counter.

"I'll stand first watch," he said. "I throw'd your blankets on the bunk, in there. It's where Hizer's clerk used to sleep, when he had one. You can shet the door an' not be disturbed if these boys gits to talkin'. I'll call you at midnight."

When the door had closed behind the officer, the four found a dry spot on the opposite side of the big room, and spread their blankets. "Boys," Black John announced,

when they had seated themselves, "we've got to change our plans."

"Whadda ya mean—change our plans?" the large man demanded, truculently.

"Not so loud. Do you want Downey to hear what's goin' on? It's like this. When Downey first told me about you, he give me to onderstand that the only evidence he had again you was the description that watchman mumbled to the nurse. But last night, after we'd stuck you fellows in the hole, he told me it was a joke—you claimin' you'd never be'n on Dominion. He says he got a dandy set of fingerprints off'n that iron bar you socked the watchman with."

"I don't believe a damn word of it!" the man exclaimed, in an undertone. "He's bluffin'!"

Black John shrugged. "Okay. It'll be your funeral, not mine, if he ain't. Did you wear gloves when you handled that bar?"

"No. I was bare handed. But I don't go much on this fingerprint stuff."

"It looks to me like you might go a hell of a long ways on it," Black John replied dryly. "It's what the jedge an' the jury thinks of fingerprints that counts—not what you think. I'm jest warnin' you that if he has got them prints, there ain't no alibi we could swear to that would do you boys a damn bit of good. I'm an outlaw. It's a cinch my word wouldn't go very far in the face of them fingerprints. An' by the looks of yer two pals, here, I don't believe theirs would h either."

"Damn you!" growled the large man. "You tuk our hundred ounces, an' now yer tryin' to welch."

"Nope. You got me wrong. I took them ounces with the onderstandin' that I was to try to get you out of the clutches of the law—an' I aim to earn 'em. I've be'n figurin' on this proposition all day. You see that York boat over there. Well, I own her. I bought her off'n Hizer a little while back. She's dry rotted till she ain't worth a damn. But I felt kinda sorry fer the old fella, so I bought her fer twenty

ounces. If you boys'll give me, say forty ounces for her, so I can show a reasonable profit, I'll let you have her."

"Sell her to us!" exclaimed the large man in a husky whisper. "Why in hell would we give you forty ounces fer a rotten York boat?"

"She'll hold together up here in the slack water, all right. You kin knock the chocks out, an' slide her into the water, an' shove across the river in her. Step out on the rocks so you don't leave no tracks, an' then shove the boat out into the current an' she'll go down through the rapids an' smash all to hell on the rocks. In the mornin' when Downey wakes up, he'll figure you stole the boat an' made a getaway in her. He'll take out after you an' when he gets to the foot of the rapids, he'll find pieces of the boat floatin' around in the big eddy, an' when he don't find no tracks on the shore, he'll figure you boys got drowned an' washed on down into Yukon, an' he'll report you dead. Instead of which, you'll be hittin' back fer Halfaday in a canoe I've got cached on the far bank, about a mile above here."

"How the hell could we git the boat out without wakin' Downey? An' how could we find that canoe in the dark?"

"Wait till jest before daylight, an' you won't have to find it in the dark."

"But—Downey'll be standin' guard on us then!"

Black John grinned. "That's right—so it'll be his fault you got away, not mine. Don't worry about wakin' him. He'll be dead to the world. I'm slippin' some sleepin' powders into his eye-opener when I call him."

"I'm fer makin' him dead to the world fer keeps," retorted the man. "What's the matter with me slippin' in there an' knockin' him off? Then we'll know damn well he can't foller us."

"Nothin' doin'," Black John replied. "You fergit that I'm a deputized officer, an' there's nothin' riles us police like gettin' one of our number knocked off. Any play like that would prove fatal to all three of you."

The other scowled. "We'll pay you them forty ounces when we git back to Cush's. I've heard about them hangin's yer s'posed to pull off on Halfaday. But I don't believe a damn word of it. We be'n there three weeks, an' we ain't got in on one of 'em yet.

Black John shrugged. "Well, yer' goin' back, ain't you? We don't like no one to be disapp'inted. You'll get in on the next one. That's a promise."

VII

CORPORAL DOWNEY awoke slowly. Only half-conscious, he vaguely realized that his brain was striving to regain consciousness. His eyes opened and in the dim interior of the trading room, he made out the litter of empty barrels and boxes. From his position on the floor with his back against the wall, he glanced toward the spot where the three prisoners had been snoring in their blankets when he went on guard at midnight. The next instant he was on his feet, his glance darting about the big room. A moment later he crossed the floor, shoved open the door of the little room to find Black John snoring on the bunk.

"Hey, John—wake up! The prisoners are gone."

The big man's eyes opened and blinked sleepily. He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. "Gone? Gone where?"

"How the hell do I know! They're gone—an' that York boat is gone, too. Hell, they're prob'ly halfway to the Yukon by now. Get up! We've got to take out after 'em!"

Black John grinned as he drew on a pac. "They was all there when I called you at midnight," he said. "By cripes, I'm glad it was yore shift they got away on, instead of mine. You might of thought I'd done some connivin'!"

"Oh, it's all my fault, all right," Downey exclaimed. "An' that's the hell of it! I never let a prisoner get away before. I don't

understand it."

"Mebbe you went to sleep an' they snuck out on you," Black John suggested.

"Why sure I went to sleep! You don't s'pose I'd let 'em get away if I was awake, do you? But why the hell did I fall asleep?"

"Well, you claimed you ain't be'n sleepin' so good, lately. Mebbe yer sleep's beginnin' to ketch up on you. Did you sleep good the forepart of the night?"

"Not very. I must have slept some, though. But I felt fine when I went on guard. That eye-opener you give me set me up okay."

"Yeah, but you got to remember, Downey, the human body needs jest about so much sleep in the long run. If a man loses it one time, he's bound to make it up another."

"I sure picked a hell of a time to make it up! Come on—let's get goin'."

"How about some breakfast?"

"To hell with breakfast! We'll portage around the rapids first. Then if we're hungry, we'll eat."

"No use takin' but one canoe," Black John said. "I'll leave mine here. If we ketch up with 'em, we can go on down to Dawson in the York boat."

"That's right," Downey agreed. "That a way we can make the portage in one trip."

At the foot of the rapids Downey stopped abruptly and pointed to an object that floated round and round in the huge eddy. "Good a God!" he cried. "What's that?"

Black John eyed the object with interest. "Why—it's a boat. Cripes, Downey—I'll bet it's my York boat! The one them prisoners stole! Look at her—the bow an' half one side stove in."

"But hell, John—a good York boat should go down through those rapids like nobody's business! Hell, on this high water what few rocks she'd touch wouldn't knock the paint off her!"

Black John grinned. "That's right, Downey. But them boys didn't have a good boat. The paint was all that was holdin' her

together—an' when the rocks knocked that off, there wasn't nothin' left."

"What do you mean?"

"Dry rot. Look here." Waiting till the boat swung against the shore, the big man reached down and grasping a section of planking in his hand, wrenched it loose and held it before Downey's eyes. His powerful fist closed upon wood that collapsed like a sponge as he squeezed the water from it. "Yes, sir—that boat's like old man Hizer—they both jest laid there an' dry rotted together."

"But—the prisoners!" Downey cried. "What became of the prisoners?"

The big man shrugged. "Oh—them?" His eyes searched the ground. "I don't see no tracks in the slush anywheres," he said. "If they didn't sink, your guess might be right, about them bein' halfways to the Yukon by this time. But I wouldn't see no p'int in follerin' 'em. Let's cook breakfast. I'll build the fire."

"Well—I guess that closes the case," Downey said. "They deserved all they got. The country's sure better off with those three dead. An' my case wasn't none too strong, anyway. They might have beat the law—but they didn't beat justice."

Black John nodded. "That's right. It's like I've told you before, Downey—there's a damn sight of difference between jestice an' the law."

"I'd sure like to recover that dust they got off the Monarch outfit," Downey said, as they sat beside the little fire and sipped their tea. "Do you s'pose we could locate their cache if we went up to Whiskey Bill's?"

"Off hand, I'd say we wouldn't have a chanct. Damn scoundrels like them is mighty cagey with their caches. My guess is that the trip wouldn't be worth yer while." He rose and held out his hand. "Well, so long, Downey. If you'll ondeputize me, I'll hit back fer Halfaday. I've got a hunch that some matter might come up that needs my attention."