



A Strange Sourdough Arrives on  
Halfaday, and—

# BLACK JOHN THINKS FAST

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Work," and Many Stories of Halfaday Creek*

**T**HE wind soughed and moaned about the eaves, and snow sifted in long slanting lines past the windows of Cushing's Fort, the isolated 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.

"Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, an' eight is twelve," announced Black John Smith, "an' I only needed ten to go out. That's another game on you, an' it



makes a total of forty-one p'int I'm ahead—an' at two bits a p'int it figgers ten dollars an' a quarter." He shoved his chair back from the card table and glanced toward the window. "She's settin' in like a real storm. Hope Corporal Downey made the Siwash village. He'll prob'ly hole up there till it's over."

"Yeah," agreed Old Cush, the somber-faced proprietor of the fort, as he gathered up the cards. "An' I hope he has good luck nickin' off that hooch-runner. Peddlin' hooch amongst the Siwashes is the lowest form of skullduggery there is. I wouldn't have no pity on a man that would do it. If we'd done like I wanted to, we'd went over there an' fetched him here an' called a miners' meetin' on him, an' hung him. It ain't only about twenty miles. Them Siwashes needs all the fur they kin ketch—it looks like we're goin' into a hard winter. But you belt out agin it."

"Shore I did," admitted Black John. "It wouldn't be ethical. You know damn well, Cush, that I don't favor sellin' hooch to Siwashes no more'n what you do. An' you know I'd enjoy hangin' any damn cuss that would do it, jest as much as you, but we've got our hands full keepin' Halfaday moral, without draggin' in any more cricks. This here case is a job fer the Mounted."

"Yeah, I s'pose it is. But jest the same, we're a damn sight apter to do a good thorough job of it, what with the police havin' to monkey around gittin' evidence, an' all—an' the hooch runner mebbe gittin' a few months in jail—an' then turned out to do it agin. Now when we know a man's guilty we hang him, an' to hell with the evidence! An' when we git him hung, he stays hung—an' he ain't back peddlin' more hooch in a couple of months."

"Shore—an' if he'd lived on Halfaday we'd had him hung before now. But the way it is, it's better the Mounted should handle the job."

"Mebbe," ventured Cush, hopefully, "if Downey can't git no evidence agin him, er if he only gits a short jail sentence, he'll move over here, figgerin' the police won't bother him on Halfaday—then we could go ahead an' hang him."

"It would be a pleasure," grinned Black John, "if he still persisted in peddlin' hooch to the Siwashes. But come on—give me credit fer that ten, twenty-five, an' then buy a drink. I've got to be gittin' home an' cook me up some dinner."

OLD CUSH rose, stoked the roaring cannon stove, and took his place behind the bar. "Them games was fer twos bits a p'int," he announced, as he made an entry in his book, "an' there wasn't nothin' said about the drinks. But there ain't no use in you goin' back to yer shack, what with the weather like it is, jest to cook dinner. I'll have the klooch fetch in an extry bowl of stew when she fetches mine."

"In that case," replied Black John, "I'll buy the drinks, an' after we've et, we kin git back to work on them cards."

"It seems kind of funny," said Cush, as he shoved the bottle across the bar, "that the Mounted would know about hooch peddlin' goin' on so fer back off the river. Them Stick Injuns never gits down to the Yukon, an' there ain't no white men over on their crick—except this one fella."

"Yeah," grinned Black John, "it does seem kind of funny, don't it? But you've got to remember, Cush, Corporal Downey's a pretty smart young fella. He's got ways of findin' out things."

"I'll bet you tipped him off, when you was down to Dawson, a while back."

"Who—me? You know damn well, Cush, that I don't make no practice of runnin' down to Dawson an' onloadin' the sins of my fella man onto the shoulders of the police. I rec'lect of talkin' to Downey—an' I suspect myself of doin' a little drinkin' when I was down there. It might be jest barely possible that my tongue got a little loose, an' I might of let slip a word er two that could of caused him to suspicion that there was somethin' wrong on that crick. The plight of them Siwashes weighed kind of heavy on my mind, bein' as that damn cuss wouldn't show up over here on Halfaday where we could hang him. *In vino veritas,* you remember, Cush."

"I don't remember no sech a damn thing," growled Cush. "An' I don't even know what yer talkin' about—now you've called it to mind."

"It's an old Latin proverb," explained Black John, "an' reduced to its lowest terms, which seems to be the only terms you kin comprehend, it means that when a man's soused he's liable to spill his guts."

"Huh," grunted Cush, "it don't take no Latin fer a man to know that. All he's got to do is run a saloon."

## II

A YOUNG Indian woman appeared and placed a bowl of steaming stew upon the bar.

"Fetch in another fer John," ordered Cush, "an' see that you git plenty of that tough rump part in hisn. He fetched us this last quarter of moose, which must of been some old bull that died of hardenin' of the arteries. You can't cut the meat with nothin' short of an ax, an' it chaws like rubber, an' you could shingle a house with the gravy."

"Yeah," grinned Black John. "I couldn't seem to make no headway on the quarter I kep', so I give it to the dogs. I thought you could handle a quarter though, with them store teeth."

"Listen," said Cush, "someone's comin'. I heard him knockin' his snowshoes agin the side of the buildin'. Mebbe Downey turned back when the storm hit."

"No, he would of been fer enough along to keep on goin'. We won't see Downey till the day after she lets up."

The door opened abruptly, and a man stepped into the room amid a whirling cloud of finely powdered snow. He slammed the door behind him, loosened his cap, and proceeded to beat the clinging white particles from his clothing. Swinging the pack sack from his shoulders, he undid the lashing of a rabbit robe, freed it of snow, tossed it over a chair, and advanced to the bar, his fur mittens dangling from the sleeves of his parka.

"Hello, sourdough!" greeted Black John. "Step up an' let the house buy you a drink."

"How do you know?" smiled the man. "Mebbe I'm jest another damn chechako."

"Not," grinned Black John, "with a rabbit robe, an' knowin' how to take care of it. An' not with a wolverine trimmed parka. An' not arrivin' in a storm that no chechako could travel a mile in, an' know what direction he was goin'."

"She is kind of owly, at that," admitted the stranger, pouring a drink from the bottle Cush had set before him.

Cush disappeared for a moment, and a few minutes later the Indian woman set a third bowl of steaming stew upon the bar. "Fly at it," invited the proprietor lugubriously, "an' if yer teeth's good you might wangle off enough nourishment to keep you alive till night. This quarter was give to me by a friend. I'm savin' the tenderloin to make door

hinges."

"You better hide it then, cause I could eat the hinges, door an' all. I've been sloggin' along pretty steady since daylight. I suppose this is Cushing's Fort on Halfaday Crick, ain't it? What with the air so damn full of snow, I couldn't tell whether I'd crossed the line, er not."

"Yeah, this is the place," replied Black John. "You come over from the Alaska side, eh?"

"Yeah. Tanana country. I found out, kind of sudden, that them parts wasn't good fer my health."

"Mine, neither. I found that out quite a while back. Halfaday's healthy, though—providin' a man kin remember to refrain from committin' murder, theft, claim-jumpin', er other forms of skullduggery. The party behind the bar is Old Cush, hissself, an' I'm one of the well-known Smith boys—Black John, to be exact."

THE man nodded. "I've heard about you fellas. A friend of mine told me—the one that advised me to hit fer Halfaday Crick. My name's Sam Corby."

"That's good reasonable name," grinned Black John. "Most folks that shows up here claims their name is John Smith."

"I won't change my name fer anyone," replied the man, his gray eyes suddenly hardening. "An' if that damn Buck McGrath shows up 'here, he'll be out of his territory an' can't do nothin'. Got himself appointed deputy marshal jest to git rid of me. Well, he kin have what he wants—an' welcome. An' sometime she'll frame him, like she helped frame me."

"I take it," observed Black John, "that some woman got intertwined in yer destiny."

"I'll say she did!" replied the man bitterly. "Take a fool's advice, an' leave women alone."

"Such belated advice is plumb wasted on us," grinned Black John. "Both of us havin' draw'd the same conclusion by means of experience."

"They're hell to handle," sighed Old Cush. "I tried four times before I got me a good one—an' then she up an' died on me."

"The good ones is all dead," opined Black John.

"Oh, I'd hate to believe that," said Corby. "There must be a lot of good women."

"Mebbe," admitted Black John, "but they shore as hell don't hang out along the cricks—nor the big river, neither—what I've seen of 'em."

"I thought Effie was different—"

“Hell, they’re all different!” interrupted Black John. “If they wasn’t, they wouldn’t git nowhere. Cripes, seven er eight of ‘em has took me at different times, fer more er less—mostly more—an’ every damn one of ‘em was different. Believe me, no woman could ever git a cent out of me agin under no circumstances.”

Behind the bar Old Cush cackled aloud. “Huh, huh, huh—how about that there McCoy gal that come up here not so long ago an’ told about her pa would lose the farm on account of that damn brother of hern—an’ you dug down in yer pocket an’ forked out thirty thousan’ dollars in cash an’ give it to her.”

“Well hell—she was different! I mean, anyone could see she was on the square—an’ besides, you was in on it, too. An’ we got our money back, an’ some more along with it when we hung that bank clerk that murdered her brother. Anyways, it was on account of her pa—I couldn’t see an old man like him lose all he had on account of such a damn skunk as his son turned out to be—even if we never got a cent of it back.”

“Yeah,” agreed Corby, “I expect they are all different. Effie—she waited table in the Star Restaurant, an’ I’d eat there when I was in off the crick. An’ pretty quick we kind of got acquainted—”

“Jest about as quick as it took her to find out you had a good claim,” supplied Black John, a sardonic smile twisting the lips behind the black beard. “An’ she begun makin’ up to you, an’ she’d kind of hang around yer table when she wasn’t too busy, slippin’ you a word, now an’ then, an’ keepin’ yer coffee cup filled, an’ cuttin’ yer pie a little wider’n what the others was cut, an’ tellin’ you how lonesome it was up here, an’ how homesick she was, an’ how she wished she had a home of her own, an’ how she’d bet you didn’t git the right kind of stuff to eat, back on yer claim, an’ how hard it must be to come in after a long day’s work an’ cook yer own vittles, an’ sew on yer own buttons—an’ all that crap. Did I call the turn—er didn’t I?”

“You did,” Corby admitted with a bitter smile.

“**A**N’ THEN,” continued Black John relentlessly, “you got to kind of feelin’ sorry fer her, an’ sorry fer yerself, an’ thinkin’ how nice it would be up to yer shack with her waitin’ with a good hot meal when you’d git through work, an’ mebbe walkin’ down to the shaft with you, an’

settin’ there talkin’ to you. An’ then you hung around till she was off shift, an’ you walked out with her beyond the edges of the camp, an’ her hand would kind of touch agin you, by accident, an’ she’d sort of stumble agin you so you’d have to ketch holt of her to keep her from fallin’, an’ you’d feel how soft she was, an’ git a whiff of the perfumery she’d doused herself with, an’ before you know’d it you’d asked her to marry you—an’ she hadn’t said ‘no’ by a damn sight!”

“That’s it exactly,” Corby exclaimed, eyeing the big man in surprise. “Why—it’s just as if you had been there.”

“Yeah?” said Black John dryly. “Well, I’ve been there, all right—more’n onct. Each one of ‘em’s got a little different line—but it all adds up the same. You kin finish the story from there. It’s all owin’ to how smart you be; or how dumb.”

“I guess I was plenty dumb,” admitted the other. “We got married. An’ it wasn’ long before I found out that all she wanted out of me was my dust. I had a good proposition on Echo Crick a little ways above the Starbuck Mine, an’ we lived up there in a pole an’ mud shack. I had about forty eighty-ounce sacks cached in Bony Cameron’s safe, an’ she wanted I should give her an order so she could draw some out fer clothes, an’ stuff fer the shack. I fixed it up fer her, an’ she’d draw out a sack, an’ go down to Fairbanks an’ stay three, four days to a time, an’ come back with a lot of clothes. But it seemed to me that unless women’s clothes come damn high, she never come back with enough of ‘em to account fer an eighty-ounce sack of dust.

“I didn’t say nothin’ though, ontill one day when I was in the saloon. Bony he calls me to one side, an’ tells me that Effie had draw’d out ten sacks inside the couple of months I’d give her the right to.

“Well, ten eighty-ounce sacks figgers right around thirteen thousan’ dollars, an’ even I know’d that the clothes an’ other stuff she fetched back from Fairbanks never figgered out at no sech amount as that. So I told Bony not to give her another damn ounce till I’d had a talk with her. She was down to Fairbanks on one of them trips then, an’ I aimed to jump her about it when she got back, which would be in three or four days, if she done like she generally done.

“**B**ONY, HE’S a good friend of mine, an’ he kind of hems an’ haws around a while, an’

then he tells me there's somethin' else I ort to know—an' he makes me promise that if he tells me I won't go off half-cocked an' jump all over him. When I promises, he tells me that Buck McGrath has been goin' to Fairbanks every time Effie went, an' stayin' about that long, an' every time he come back he had more good clothes, an' plenty of money. Buck, he's a gambler that hangs around an' takes the wages off'n the workers in the Starbuck Mine after gittin' 'em soused.

"Well—to make a long story short, I seen red. What Bony told me kind of checked in with a thing er two I'd noticed myself, an' I was goin' back to my shack an' git out the old hog-leg an' go down to Fairbanks right then. But Bony talked me out of it. Pointin' out that me not bein' known down there, and all—if I'd make a gun play, I'd git myself in a hell of a jam, an' mebbe git lynched, er hung by miners' meetin' before I'd have a chanct to prove I had a right to kill him. He said he was goin' down to Fairbanks next day, anyhow, an' he'd look around an' see what he could see, an' give me the straight dope on it. Then if things was that bad, I could do as I felt like after Buck an' Effie got back. He said he'd take all the rest of my dust down with him an' trade it for bills, so if I had to make a quick gitaway I wouldn't have to pack no heavy dust. An' as things turned out, it was a damn good thing he did—but not quite the way he figgered.

"I went back to my claim an' the third night after that, I woke up with someone poundin' on the door. It was Bony, an' he was damn near all in, what with comin' clean through from Fairbanks without stoppin'.

"'Git up,' he says, 'an' git you an earful of this! The manager of the Starbuck Mine was knocked off night before last, an' fifty thousan' dollars in cash was took off'n him, about halfways between Fairbanks an' the mine. They trade in their dust fer bills twict a month, an' he was comin' back with the money. Yesterday Buck McGrath an' Effie goes to the U.S. marshal an' tells him that they're positive it was you that done it! That damn McGrath told the marshal that he didn't know nothin' about it, personally, but that Effie had told him that you had been figgerin' on pullin' the job fer quite a while, an' she identified a gun that was layin' there beside the manager as yourn. McGrath claimed that when Effie told him that, he figgered it was his duty to bring her to the marshal's office an' let her tell him about it. She done it, all right; so

convincin' that there's a murder an' robbery warrant out agin' you—an' that ain't all! Buck McGrath told old Fogarty, the marshal, that if he'd deputize him, he'd serve the warrant an' fetch you in hisself! Effie claimed she'd help—that you had another gun, too, an' she'd come back to the claim, an' hide that one so you wouldn't have none, an' Buck would hide in the brush, an' she'd git you in a corner, er grab you around the arms so you couldn't put up no fight, an' yell fer Buck, an' he could take you in."

THE man paused and poured himself another drink. "Well, I seen it all then—how with me out of the way, they'd have all my dust, an' the claim to boot. That hold-up an' murder was shore a good break fer them. It give 'em the chanct they'd been waitin' fer. An' with my own wife testifyin' agin me, I wouldn't have a show. But then I happened to remember that I'd heard there was somethin' in the law about not lettin' a man's wife testify agin him in court, an' I told Bony so. He looked at me kind of funny. 'Git this, you damn fool,' he says. 'Don't you see that there wouldn't be no testifyin', because there wouldn't never be no trial! Buck McGrath wants you out of the way—fer keeps. He wants yer dust, an' he wants Effie. It wouldn't do him no good to jail you—he'll come out here an' kill you. That's what he'll do, an' then between 'em they'll claim it was self-defense—that you was heeled, an' was resistin' arrest.'

"I was cool as hell, by that time, an' I goes over an' takes down the six-gun an' feeds her some shells. 'There won't only be one hitch in that program,' I says, 'an' that is it's goin' to be Buck McGrath they bury, instead of me.'

"Bony, he bangs his fist on the table an' calls me all the damn fools he kin lay his tongue to. 'You can't do that! They'll bury you both, if you do. He's a U.S. deputy marshal in discharge of his duty—an' they'll hang you higher'n hell if you kill him! They won't give you no breaks at all. Yer in wrong from the start—with that warrant agin' you!'

"I asks him why in hell Fogarty didn't serve the warrant himself, instead of deputizin' that damn Buck McGrath? Bony laughs. 'Fogarty's kind of old an' fat, an' easy to hit with a six-gun—an' he knows it. He ain't huntin' no chances to shoot it out with no murderers. Believe me, he jumped at the chanct of deputizin' Buck fer the job. Fogarty's no damn fool. He's lived quite a while, by not shootin'

it out with folks—an' he's willin' to live longer.'

"What the hell'll I do?" I says. 'Stay here an' let 'em knock me off?'

"No,' says Bony, 'you throw a stampedin' pack together an' hit out right now! Hit fer the Yukon line. Keep on upriver, an' keep goin' on an' on till you cross the divide into the valley of the White River. Then hunt up Halfaday Crick an' go to Cushing's Fort, an' tell Black John Smith an' Old Cush that Left Handed John Smith says hello, an' he's alive an' kickin'—an' if you ever git over into the Tanana country to stop into the saloon at Starbuck, an' he'll buy a drink.'"

"Left Handed John, eh?" said Black John. "Shore—I rec'lect him! He pulled out better'n a year ago. Don't you mind, Cush—it was Left Handed John that could do all them card tricks! He was a Yukon wanted—pulled off some kind of a venture down around Whitehorse, er Hootalinqua, er somewheres. Left Handed was all right. I'm glad to hear he's doin' well. I wonder if Bony Cameron would be his real name? Er just one he thought up?"

"I couldn't say," replied Cush. "But I'm glad to hear that he's gone into a respectable business. I take a kind of a pride in it when one of our local boys makes good."

"**H**E'S a damn good fella," said Corby. "He shore saved me from committin' a murder. Er gittin' murdered—one er the other. He helped me throw my stuff together, an' give me the thirty-eight thousan' in bills that he got fer my dust—an' here I be. Besides that, he took an assignment on my claim, so them two damn crooks won't git it. He'll sell it out fer me, an' ship me the money. An' by the way, I wonder if I could cache them bills in yer safe?"

"Shore," said Cush. "Pass 'em over, an' we'll count 'em—an' I'll give you a receipt. I expect that when this here Buck McGrath found you'd skipped out, he quit huntin' fer you."

Corby shook his head. "Nope—he's a damn good man on the trail, Buck is. I've sighted him twice on my back trail, from high divides. I kep' a-goin' day after day, hopin' it would snow so he'd lose my trail—but it didn' snow. Day before yesterday I picked him up with my glass—must of been eight, ten mile behind, but still a-comin'. He wouldn't know yet about me cashin' in my dust an' packin' it with me, an' assignin' the claim. He

wants Effie—ah' he figgers he can't marry her as long as I'm alive. An' he can't git holt of my dust or my claim without marryin' her. He'll keep a-comin' as long as he thinks he's got a chanct to knock me off. He might of lost my trail by now, though. It started in to snow yesterday afternoon."

When the stews were finished, the Indian woman removed the bowls, and Black John turned to the stranger. "Take it on days like this, when there ain't much else to do, me an' Cush generally plays cribbage fer two bits a p'int to pass the time. Yer welcome to set in on it if you'd like. It beats shakin' dice fer the drinks, because, take it a whole day to a stretch, that way a man's apt to git more drinks under his belt than he really needs. Mebbe some of the boys'll drop around later fer a game of stud."

"Cribbage suits me, er stud, either," Corby replied. "A man can't do much in the way of huntin' him a location on a day like this. I'd like to git located as soon as I kin, though. I ain't much of a hand to lay around. How's chances along the crick?"

"**M**OST any claim you'd stake would run you better'n wages," replied Black John. "A few claims along the crick is damn good propositions. An' prob'ly lots more of 'em jest as good ain't been located yet. What you better do is hole up with me till you kin look things over. I'd say yer best bet would be to move into some shack that's already built, an' work that claim till spring, an' then you'll have a chanct to look around fer a better proposition."

"But—why would a man abandon a claim with a shack on it, that was payin' better'n wages?" queried the man.

"Their reasons," grinned Black John, "is various, not to say even divers an' sundry. Mostly, it's owin' to their gittin' hung because they couldn't remember not to steal or murder folks. Bein' as a lot of us here on the crick is outlawed, fer one reason er another, we deem it necessary to keep Halfaday so damn moral that the police don't even suspicion there's anythin' wrong up here.

"But some of the boys, like Left Handed John, er Bony Cameron, as you call him, especially if they're Yukon wanteds, jest moves on to other fields of endeavor, to avoid the nuisance of jumpin' back an' forth acrost the line every time a policeman shows up.

“Then there’s been a few weird souls that’s pulled out an’ gone back to the States because they lacked a cow to milk on Halfaday, er needed a barn to smell of to be happy, er yearned to slop a hog. No claim on Halfaday has been worked out, but there’s been quite a few abandoned.”

“I don’t think I’ll locate here permanent,” said Corby. “If Buck McGrath finds out I’ve crossed the line, he’ll either come on over here after me, er he’ll hit fer Dawson an’ git the Mounted on the case. If they’d arrest me an’ turn me over to Buck, he’d shore manage to knock me off before we got back to Starbuck. I wouldn’t have a show, handcuffed, an’ no gun.”

“Bein’ an American officer, he ain’t got no jurisdiction on Halfaday,” said Black John, “an’ we won’t stand fer him arrestin’ you here. He’ll have to connect up with the Mounted—but the hell of it is, if he comes along within the next day er two, he’s apt to do jest that without much trouble. Corporal Downey’s in this part of the country right now, over to a Siwash village after a hooch runner, an’ he’s apt to show up with him as quick as this storm lets up. Tomorrow, you better slip into some empty cabin an’ hole up till Downey goes back down to Dawson, We’ll sort of keep you posted. But with both an American an’ a Canadian officer on Halfaday to onct, a man wouldn’t have no place to duck to. Such a condition is vicious in the extreme. It ain’t never happened before. Them American marshals don’t hardly ever git so far from home.”

### III

THE storm had ceased next morning, as Black John sauntered into the saloon and crossed to the bar where Old Cush had already set out bottle and glasses.

“Where’s Corby?” asked the proprietor. “Ain’t he comin’ in fer an eye-opener?”

“No, he claims he don’t never drink no licker in the mornin’. There’s a few folks like that. Corporal Downey’s one of ‘em. You can’t hold it agin’ ‘em. It’s prob’ly their stumick, er somethin’. Downey’s a damn good fella—an’ so’s Sam Corby.”

“Seems like,” admitted Cush. “But—s’pose he was lyin’?”

“Lyin’? What would he be lyin’ about?”

“Why, all that stuff he told us might be a lie. There’s a robbery an’ murder back there, an’ fifty

thousan’ in bills is stole, an’ here he shows up with thirty-eight thousan’ in bills, an’ claims Left Handed John handed it to him after sellin’ his dust fer him—an’ he come right out an’ said how he’s the one that’s suspected of the robbery an’ murder to start out with.”

“Sam told a pretty straight story. An’ he’s got a good honest look about him—”

“Hell—so’ve you!” snorted Cush.

“Me!” exclaimed Black John, a grin twisting the corners of his lips. “Well, why the hell wouldn’t I have?”

“Honest looks had ort to be took with a dose of salts—’specially on Halfaday,” grunted Cush with a shrug. “As fer as I kin see, there ain’t nothin’ to prevent them bills from bein’ the ones that was stole.”

“In the first place,” defended Black John, “thirty-eight thousan’ ain’t fifty thousan’—”

“It could be that only thirty-eight thousan’ was stole,” persisted Cush. “An’ it could be that twelve thousan’ was peeled off the roll. Even if Left Handed John is in a respectable business now, he wouldn’t be above takin’ a commission of twelve thousan’ in cash fer helpin’ with a gitaway. He ain’t no damn fool.”

“Well, of course, it could be that way,” admitted Black John. “But even so—what a man done before he come to Halfaday ain’t none of our business. What you always so damn suspicious fer?”

“I know it ain’t none of our business no matter what he done. But damn it, no matter how much murderin’ er stealin’ a man does, I like fer him to be honest! He knows damn well he’s this side of the line. Why couldn’t he come right out an’ tell what he done? That’s one thing I like about you, John—no matter how crooked you be, yer honest.”

“Why—you damn old badger! What d’you mean—crooked? I was outlawed more on account of a prank that a crime. I never figgered there was anythin’ onethical about h’istin’ that Army payroll after that major had made his brag, like he done—an’ the odds all agin’ me. It was a sportin’ proposition with me.”

“Uh-huh,” replied Old Cush dryly, “but you didn’t lose no money on the deal, at that. Forty thousan’ dollars is damn good pay fer a half-hour of even a sportsman’s time.”

“Jest the same, I believe every word Sam told us. It’s too logical, an’ too well put together fer a lie. An’ besides, I like him. He’s gone off up the

crick to look over a couple of shacks I told him about. I believe his best bet would be Whiskey Bill's old cabin. It's way to hell an' gone up a feeder."

**T**HERE was a momentary fumbling at the latch, and a moment later the door was flung violently open and a man stood framed in the doorway, a cocked six-gun in his bared hand, from the wrist of which dangled a fur mitten. The gun covered the two men at the bar. "What the hell's this—a Wild West show?" demanded Black John. "Come on in an' shut the door, an' put up that gun before someone gits hurt. What the hell do you think yer pullin' off here, anyway?"

After a careful scrutiny of the room, the man lowered the gun, and closing the door behind him, approached the bar.

"McGrath's the name—Buck McGrath," he announced. "I'm a United States deputy marshal. I'm huntin' a bird that pulled off a murder an' robbery over on the Tanana. I'd damn near caught up with him yesterday, but I lost him in the storm. Has he been here?"

"I couldn't say," answered Cush. "The house is buyin' a drink."

"Did anyone come here yesterday?" demanded the man, filling his glass.

"Oh, shore—it was a bad day fer workin' on the claims, what with the storm, an' all. A lot of folks come in an' went out agin."

"Any strangers?"

"I couldn't say; what with tendin' bar, an' runnin' the tradin' room, too—it kep' me too busy to notice."

"You don't talk much, do you?" snorted the man, and turned abruptly on Black John. "How about you?"

"Me? Oh, hell—I like to talk. Cush there, he would, too—if he know'd more words. Trouble with him is, he never got no proper education. Now take me, an' I—"

"What the hell do I care about you?" snapped the man. "What I want to know—was Sam Corby in here yesterday?"

"Sam who?"

"Sam Corby—the feller that held up the Starbuck manager an' shot him, an' got away with a fifty-thousan'-dollar payroll."

"Did he?" asked Black John, his eyes widening. "Well, what do you know about that! Fifty thousan'

dollars, eh? That's a lot of money, ain't it? One time back in Ohio, a fella—"

"To hell with Ohio! Was Sam Corby in here?"

"Ohio's a damn good state. It's got—"

"I'll say you like to talk!" cried the exasperated man. "Listen, was there a stranger stopped in here yesterday? Answer me that."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Corby—Sam Corby!"

"There was a famby of Corbys lived on a farm about four mile out of town on the Xenia pike, back in Ohio—but I don't rec'lect any of 'em was named Sam."

**M**cGRATH drew a long breath of resignation. "Listen here—do you like whiskey?" he asked.

"Who—me? Why shore I do," replied Black John. "But my Uncle Emmet, he liked it better'n what I do. He—"

"I'll buy you three drinks if you'll tell me if Sam Corby was in here yesterday—or any stranger."

"I jest happened to think," grinned Black John, "them folks on the Xenia pike wasn't named Corby—it was Metzgars lived there. Corbys lived off on a side road . . . only their name was Crosby, come to think of it. A lot of strangers could of come in yesterday, an' went out agin. I wasn't here only part of the day. I wouldn't know."

The man scowled. "I was damn near up with him yesterday, an' then the storm broke, an' I lost his trail. I stumbled onto a big log buildin' couple of miles back from here, an' holed up fer the night. It had grub an' blankets, an' firewood all cut, but no one was around there. There was a lot of bunks, an' dishes an' stuff for quite a crowd. What place is that?"

"Oh, that's the Alasky Country Club," said Black John. "Some of the Yukon boys built it fer a sort of a health resort. It's over acrost the line—on the American side."

"American side!" cried McGrath. "Where the hell is this? In the Yukon?"

"Shore. This here's Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday Crick, Yukon Territory. Hell, didn't you even know you was in the Yukon? You crossed the line about a mile back up that draw."

"Yukon, er no Yukon," growled the man, "if I run onto Sam Corby, I'm takin' him back!"

"You'd have to kind of git the right papers from

the Mounted, wouldn't you?" asked Black John mildly.

"To hell with the Mounted! You Canucks think there can't no one get their man, but the Mounted. But I'll show you different. If Sam Corby's on this crick, I'm takin' him back, er I'm leavin' him here fer you folks to bury—see?"

"Oh, shore," replied Black John. "We would bury him if he was dead. We've buried quite a lot of 'em. We ain't never buried a U.S. marshal, though. But there's a lot of us would like to."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Well, I was jest thinkin' that you ain't got no right to arrest no one this side of the line, an' if you was to try it, we'd call a miners' meetin' an' hang you fer kidnappin', an' then we could go ahead an' bury you."

The man laughed a sneering laugh. "Listen here, boob—don't never git it into yer head that any windbag like you kin throw a scare into me! I'm hard—see? An' if I git any more out of you I'm liable to take yer whiskers off an' whale you with 'em. I'm the baby that calls all bluffs!"

Old Cush's eye measured the distance to the six-gun that lay beneath the bar, but to his surprise Black John only smiled. "Callin' bluffs is all right, mister," he said, "as long as they're bluffs. But if they ain't, a man might better keep right on raisin'."

The door opened suddenly, and Sam Corby stepped into the room. Before Black John could move to prevent it, McGrath's six-gun roared. The explosion was followed by two others, so close together that they sounded almost as one, and McGrath lurched sidewise a few steps and crashed forward, overturning a card table, as the revolver dropped from his nerveless fingers, and a widening ribbon of red pushed slowly along the grain of the floorboard.

Over by the door Corby stood, gun in hand, as blood gushed from the furrow plowed by McGrath's bullet along the side of his head, and coursed down across his cheek, dimming his left eye.

"Good shootin'," approved Black John a moment later, as he ascertained that Corby's wound was scarcely more than skin deep. "An' his wasn't so bad. A quarter of an inch to the right, an' we'd of been buryin' you both."

"The damn cuss never gave me a break—never even tried to arrest me!" exclaimed Corby. "He'd

planned to kill me, all right—an' he was goin' to do it in spite of hell."

"Yeah," said Black John, "it shore looks that way, don't it? I'd jest got through tellin' him that he wouldn't be allowed to arrest you this side of the line. I wanted he should go back off the crick without forcin' us to hang him. He kind of talked like he thought I was bluffin'. But—how come you're back so soon? I thought you went on up to Whiskey Bill's old shack—the one I told you about, up that feeder."

"I STARTED fer there, but when I come to that wide flat, about three miles above here, I turned back. I could see two men comin', a couple of miles farther on. I put the glass on 'em, an' seen that the front one's hands was tied behind him. I know'd then it was that corporal you was tellin' me about, an' he was fetchin' in his prisoner. I know'd it wouldn't do me no good to go on an' try to hide out from him, if Buck had got here, because I was leavin' a plain trail in the new snow—so I turned back to find out what was doin' here, an' to pick up my stamperin' pack so I could keep right on goin', if I had to. Then I stepped in the door, an' the next thing I know'd, me an' Buck was shootin' it out." The man paused and regarded the dead man gravely. "I'm sorry he made me do it," he said. "I never wanted to kill no one—not even him. An' now I'm in a hell of a fix—no matter which way the cat jumps. No matter how bad Buck was, nor how much he needed killin', he's an American officer, an' I'm supposed to be a robber an' murderer, an' I killed him in the discharge of his duty, er at least, that's what they'll claim. What show have I got?"

"Listen," said Black John hurriedly. "How fer away did you say Downey was when you seen him?"

"I guess about a couple of miles. It won't be long before he gits here."

"Yer damn right it won't!" agreed Black John, as he hurried to the dead man, stooped over him, and fumbled for a moment in his clothing. Then he hurried back to Corby and, turning back the lapel of his heavy woolen jacket, he pinned a badge in place, at the same time thrusting a folded paper into his inner pocket. "Use yer head," he commanded in a low, steely voice. "You're the marshal. Yer name's Buck McGrath. Yonder lays Sam Corby. He opened up on you as soon as you stepped

through the door. You had to kill him. It was self-defense. You got yer man!”

“You mean—?”

“Shut up! You fool—here’s Downey now. Use yer head—that’s all. An’ now me an’ Cush better git that gash in yer head tied up. It’s still bleedin’.”

“What the hell come off in here?” cried Corporal Downey a moment later, as he pushed hurriedly past his manacled prisoner, and advanced into the room, his eyes on the dead man who still lay as he had fallen.

“A shootin’,” replied Black John. “Come on, Downey—you police is handy at sech matters—help us git the marshal’s head tied up, an’ we’ll tell you about it.”

“Marshal?”

“Yeah. Buck McGrath, his name is. He’s a U.S. deputy marshal.”

“What’s he doin’ over this side of the line?”

“He follered his man here—er rather he over-run him in the storm. He got here yesterday, an’ Corby there, he didn’t git here till this mornin’ whilst the marshal was takin’ a siyou up the crick to see if he could run acrost his trail. He says he went up about three mile, an’ didn’ see no tracks, so he turned around an’ come back, to hit out some other way. In the meantime Corby had got here. He’d stumbled onto the Alaska Country Club yesterday in the storm, an’ holed up there, an’ the marshal went on past. He didn’t know he’d crossed the line into the Yukon till me an’ Cush told him. He put up with me, last night, an’ I told him you’d be along in a day or so, an’ he decided to wait an’ mebbe git you to make the pinch fer him. But when he stepped in the door, a few minutes ago that damn Corby begun blastin’ at him, an’ he blasted back—an’ you kin see fer yerself that he done the best shootin’ of the two.”

“Plenty good enough,” admitted Downey. “But—how do you know he’s a marshal?”

Black John combed at his thick beard with his fingers. “Well hell, Downey, I don’t know—only what he told me. He’d ort to be able to prove it, hadn’t he? He’d have a badge—er papers er somethin’ wouldn’t he?”

The wounded man leaning against the end of the bar smiled at the young officer. “I feel a little bit dizzy, Corporal,” he said. “Wait a minute till my head clears, an’ I’ll show you what you want.”

“Plenty of time,” said Downey. “Better come over here an’ sit in one of these chairs, an’ I’ll git

to work on you with my first aid stuff. That was a damn close call. You’re lucky.”

“The dirty cuss shot before I even knew he was in here. I’ll tell the world I’m lucky!”

“An’ now,” said Downey, after the man’s head had been neatly bandaged. “Maybe you’d better show me yer credentials. I’ll have to make a report. I know yer tellin’ the truth about goin’ up the crick and back. I seen yer tracks.”

**T**URNING back the lapel of his jacket, the man showed his badge, and drawing the warrant from his pocket, handed it to Downey, who read it carefully. “Murder an’ robbery, eh? You ain’t searched the body yet, of course?”

“No,” smiled the man. “The fact is, I’m feelin’ a bit groggy even now. Suppose we all have a drink, an’ then mebbe you’d search it fer me, Corporal. I don’t suppose you’ll find the goods on him, though—fifty thousan’ in bills is what the mine people claimed was gone. But he had damn near two days the start of me—an’ he’s had plenty of time to cache it.”

“The drinks is on the house,” said Old Cush, stepping back of the bar and setting out bottle and glasses.

After a couple of rounds, Corporal Downey stooped and turned the dead man over onto his back. For several moments he knelt beside him, staring into his face. “Seems like I ought to know him,” he muttered, as his hands explored the pockets but produced nothing of value. “I’ve sure seen that face before.”

Unbuttoning the man’s vest, the young officer’s exploring fingers came into contact with a hard, thick packet concealed beneath his shirt. Ripping the garment open, he withdrew the packet and opening it, disclosed the money—thirty bills of the denomination of one thousand dollars, and two hundred one hundred dollar bills.

With a smile, he turned the money over to the wounded man. “Here it is—every cent of it!” he exclaimed. “It seems that your luck still holds.”

As Sam Corby’s hands grasped the money, they trembled slightly. This was the thing he had never expected. He had supposed merely that Buck McGrath had taken advantage of a robbery to do away with him—not that he, himself was the author of the robbery. He and Effie? Sam Corby wondered. His brain was still racing along these lines, when a sharp exclamation escaped Corporal

Downey's lips.

"I knew I'd seen that face before! I knew I ought to know him. Look at that V-shaped scar—low down on his neck, where the collar of his shirt hid it. He got that one night in a knife play in Cuter Malone's Klondike Palace, in Dawson! Sam Corby—hell! He's Slippery Davis—that's who he is. One of the lowest-lived characters that ever hit the Yukon. Gambler, pimp, thief—an' we've got good reason to believe, murderer, too. He disappeared a couple of years ago, but we've been on the lookout for him ever since. The boys down around Dawson'll be glad to rub him off the book. I tell you, Marshal—you're to be congratulated. Slippery Davis was rated a dead shot with a six-gun."

#### IV

**A**N HOUR later, Corporal Downey pulled out with his hooch runner prisoner, leaving Black John and Cush and Corby in the saloon.

Black John grinned at the wounded man. "Well, Sam," he said. "How does it feel to be dead?"

"What?"

"Yer a dead man, from now on. Corporal Downey's report says so. You was shot an' killed by Buck McGrath in Cushing Fort, in self-defense, an' in discharge of his dooty."

"Say, that's right," exclaimed the other. "What in hell will I do, now? I shore can't go back to the Tanana, er they'd know it was me killed McGrath!"

"They might have an inklin' that such was the case," grinned Black John. "Besides which, Downey might hear of it, an' somehow blame me fer him gittin' his notes mixed. He might even think I tried to put somethin' over on him. Tellin'

you about me—if I had eighty-eight thousan' dollars in good sound bills an' was in your set of circumstances, I'd hit out over the Dalton trail an' start life all over in some other part of the world. There won't no one be huntin' you. They'll be huntin' Buck McGrath, the U.S. deputy marshal that skipped out with fifty thousan' dollars that he took off'n the robber he killed."

"But I won't have no eighty-eight thousan'," said Corby. "I don't want that fifty thousan'—nor no part of it. It ain't mine, an' never was. I've got the thirty-eight thousan' there in Cush's safe. I'll take that, an' do like you say. It's mine, an' every damn cent of it honestly come by. To hell with that fifty thousan'!"

"What," queried Black John, "would you like to have done with it?"

"There it lays—right there on the bar. Take it, an' do what you damn please with it. You shore saved my life by yer quick thinkin'. If you hadn't thought to switch that badge an' the warrant, I'd of hung fer murder, shore as hell. I can't give you that money—'cause it ain't mine to give—but if you kin find any good use fer it—there it lays. I won't have nothin' to do with it!"

Picking up the bills, Black John riffled them through with his thumb. "The numbers ain't even consecutive," he remarked, passing the packet over to Cush. "Better stick 'em in the safe, Cush. Me an' you will try to make use of 'em, some way. It's just like I've told you, Cush—quick thinkin' sometimes pays."

"An' now," said Corby, "if Cush'll hand me over my thirty-eight thousan', I'll be hittin' the trail. I'd kind of like to skip out of Skagway, before they begin huntin' fer Buck McGrath. They might pick me up by mistake."