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Black Talons

by

Robert E. Howard

Joel Brill slapped shut the book he had been scanning, and gave vent to his dissatisfaction in language more appropriate for the deck of a whaling ship than for the library of the exclusive Corinthian Club. Buckley, seated in an alcove nearby, grinned quietly. Buckley looked more like a college professor than a detective, and perhaps it was less because of a studious nature than a desire to play the part he looked, that caused him to loaf around the library of the Corinthian.

"It must be something unusual to drag you out of your lair at this time of the day," he remarked. "This is the first time I ever saw you in the evening. I thought you spent your evenings secluded in your rooms, pouring over musty tomes in the interests of that museum you're connected with."

"I do, ordinarily." Brill looked as little like a scientist as Buckley looked like a dick. He was squarely built, with thick shoulders and the jaw and fists of a prizefighter; low browed, with a mane of tousled black hair contrasting with his cold blue eyes.

"You've been shoving your nose into books here since six o'clock," asserted Buckley.

"I've been trying to get some information for the directors of the museum," answered Brill. "Look!" He pointed an accusing finger at the rows of lavishly bound volumes. "Books till it would sicken a dog--and not a blasted one can tell me the reason for a certain ceremonial dance practiced by a certain tribe on the West African Coast."

"A lot of the members have knocked around a bit," suggested Buckley. "Why not ask them?"

"I'm going to." Brill took down a phone from its hook.

"There's John Galt--" began Buckley.

"Too hard to locate. He flits about like a mosquito with the St. Vitus. I'll try Jim Reynolds." He twirled the dial.

"Thought you'd done some exploring in the tropics yourself," remarked Buckley.

"Not worthy of the name. I hung around that God-forsaken Hell hole of the West African Coast for a few months until I came down with malaria--Hello!"

A suave voice, too perfectly accented, came along the wire.

"Oh, is that you, Yut Wuen? I want to speak to Mr. Reynolds."

Polite surprise tinged the meticulous tone.

"Why, Mr. Reynolds went out in response to your call an hour ago, Mr. Brill."

"What's that?" demanded Brill. "Went where?"

"Why, surely you remember, Mr. Brill." A faint uneasiness seemed to edge the Chinaman's voice. "At about nine o'clock you called, and I answered the phone. You said you wished to speak to Mr. Reynolds. Mr. Reynolds talked to you, then told me to have his car brought around to the side entrance. He said that you had requested him to meet you at the cottage on White Lake shore."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Brill. "This is the first time I've phoned Reynolds for weeks! You've mistaken somebody else for me."

There was no reply, but a polite stubbornness seemed to flow over the wire. Brill replaced the phone and turned to Buckley, who was leaning forward with aroused interest.

"Something fishy here," scowled Brill. "Yut Wuen, Jim's Chinese servant, said *I* called, an hour ago, and Jim went out to meet me. Buckley, you've been here all evening. *Did* I call up anybody? I'm so infernally absent-minded--"

"No, you didn't," emphatically answered the detective. "I've been sitting right here close to the phone ever since six o'clock. Nobody's used it. And you haven't left the library during that time. I'm so accustomed to spying on people, I do it unconsciously."

"Well, say," said Brill, uneasily, "suppose you and I drive over to White Lake. If this is a joke, Jim may be over there waiting for me to show up."

As the city lights fell behind them, and houses gave way to clumps of trees and bushes, velvet black in the star-light, Buckley said: "Do you think Yut Wuen made a mistake?"

"What else could it be?" answered Brill, irritably.

"Somebody might have been playing a joke, as you suggested. Why should anybody impersonate you to Reynolds?"

"How should I know? But I'm about the only acquaintance he'd bestir himself for, at this time of night. He's reserved, suspicious of people. Hasn't many friends. I happen to be one of the few."

"Something of a traveler, isn't he?"

"There's no corner of the world with which he isn't familiar."

"How'd he make his money?" Buckley asked, abruptly.

"I've never asked him. But he has plenty of it."

The clumps on each side of the road grew denser, and scattered pinpoints of light that marked isolated farm houses faded out behind them. The road tilted gradually as they climbed higher and higher into the wild hill region which, an hour's drive from the city, locked the broad crystalline sheet of silver that men called White Lake. Now ahead of them a glint shimmered among the trees, and topping a wooded crest, they saw the lake spread out below them, reflecting the stars in myriad flecks of silver. The road meandered along the curving shore.

"Where's Reynolds' lodge?" inquired Buckley.

Brill pointed. "See that thick clump of shadows, within a few yards of the water's edge? It's the only cottage on this side of the lake. The others are three or four miles away. None of them occupied, this time of the year. There's a car drawn up in front of the cottage."

"No light in the shack," grunted Buckley, pulling up beside the long low roadster that stood before the narrow stoop. The building reared dark and silent before them, blocked against the rippling silver sheen behind it.

"Hey, Jim!" called Brill. "Jim Reynolds!"

No answer. Only a vague echo shuddering down from the blackly wooded hills.

"Devil of a place at night," muttered Buckley, peering at the dense shadows that bordered the lake. "We might be a thousand miles from civilization."

Brill slid out of the car. "Reynolds must be here--unless he's gone for a midnight boat ride."

Their steps echoed loudly and emptily on the tiny stoop. Brill banged the door and shouted. Somewhere back in the woods a night bird lifted a drowsy note. There was no other answer.

Buckley shook the door. It was locked from the inside.

"I don't like this," he growled. "Car in front of the cottage--door locked on the inside--nobody answering it. I believe I'll break the door in--"

"No need." Brill fumbled in his pocket. "I'll use my key."

"How comes it you have a key to Reynolds' shack?" demanded Buckley.

"It was his own idea. I spent some time with him up here last summer, and he insisted on giving me a key, so I could use the cottage any time I wanted to. Turn on your flash, will you? I can't find the lock."

All right, I've got it. Hey, Jim! Are you here?"

Buckley's flash played over chairs and card tables, coming to rest on a closed door in the opposite wall. They entered and Buckley heard Brill fumbling about with an arm elevated. A faint click followed and Brill swore.

"The juice is off. There's a line running out from town to supply the cottage owners with electricity, but it must be dead. As long as we're in here, let's go through the house. Reynolds may be sleeping somewhere--"

He broke off with a sharp intake of breath. Buckley had opened the door that led to the bedroom. His flash played on the interior--on a broken chair, a smashed table--a crumpled shape that lay in the midst of a dark widening pool.

"Good God, it's Reynolds!"

Buckley's gun glinted in his hand as he played the flash around the room, sifting the shadows for lurking shapes of menace; it rested on a bolted rear door; rested longer on an open window, the screen of which hung in tatters.

"We've got to have more light," he grunted. "Where's the switch? Maybe a fuse has blown."

"Outside, near that window." Stumblingly Brill led the way out of the house and around to the window. Buckley flashed his light, grunted.

"The switch has been pulled!" He pushed it back in place, and light flooded the cottage. The light streaming through the windows seemed to emphasize the blackness of the whispering woods around them. Buckley glared into the shadows, seemed to shiver. Brill had not spoken; he shook as with ague.

Back in the house they bent over the man who lay in the middle of the red-splashed floor.

Jim Reynolds had been a stocky, strongly built man of middle age. His skin was brown and weather-beaten, hinting of tropic suns. His features were masked with blood; his head lolled back, disclosing an awful wound beneath his chin.

"His throat's been cut!" stammered Brill. Buckley shook his head.

"Not cut--torn. Good God, it looks like a big cat had ripped him."

The whole throat had literally been torn out; muscles, arteries, windpipe and the great jugular vein had been severed; the bones of the vertebrae showed beneath.

"He's so bloody I wouldn't have recognized him," muttered the detective. "How did you know him so quickly? The instant we saw him, you cried out that it was Reynolds."

"I recognized his garments and his build," answered the other. "But what in God's name killed him?"

Buckley straightened and looked about. "Where does that door lead to?"

"To the kitchen; but it's locked on this side."

"And the outer door of the front room was locked on the inside," muttered Buckley. "Doesn't take a genius to see how the murderer got in--and he--or *it* --went out the same way."

"What do you mean, *it*?"

"Does that look like the work of a human being?" Buckley pointed to the dead man's mangled throat. Brill winced.

"I've seen black boys mauled by the big cats on the West Coast--"

"And whatever tore Reynolds' gullet out, tore that window screen. It wasn't cut with a knife."

"Do you suppose a panther from the hills--" began Brill.

"A panther smart enough to throw the electric switch before he slid through the window?" scoffed Buckley.

"We don't know the killer threw the switch."

"Was Reynolds fooling around in the dark, then? No; when I pushed the switch back in place, the light came on in here. That shows it had been on; the button hadn't been pushed back. Whoever killed Reynolds had a reason for wanting to work in the dark. Maybe this was it!" The detective indicated, with a square-shod toe, a stubby chunk of blue steel that lay not far from the body.

"From what I hear about Reynolds, he was quick enough on the trigger." Buckley slipped on a glove, carefully lifted the revolver, and scanned the chamber. His gaze, roving about the room again, halted at the window, and with a single long stride, he reached it and bent over the sill.

"One shot's been fired from this gun. The bullet's in the window sill. At least, one bullet is, and it's logical to suppose it's the one from the empty chamber of Reynolds' gun. Here's the way I reconstruct the crime: *something* sneaked up to the shack, threw the switch, and came busting through the window. Reynolds shot once in the dark and missed, and then the killer got in his work. I'll take this gun to headquarters; don't expect to find any fingerprints except Reynolds', however. We'll examine the light switch, too, though maybe my dumb pawing erased any fingerprints that might have been there. Say, it's a good thing you have an iron-clad alibi."

Brill started violently. "What the Hell do you mean?"

"Why, there's the Chinaman to swear you called Reynolds to his death."

"Why the devil should I do such a thing?" hotly demanded the scientist.

"Well," answered Buckley, "I know you were in the library of the club all evening. That's an unshakable alibi--I suppose."

Brill was tired as he locked the door of his garage and turned toward the house which rose dark and silent among the trees. He found himself wishing that his sister, with whom he was staying, had not left town for the weekend with her husband and children. Dark empty houses were vaguely repellent to him after the happenings of the night before.

He sighed wearily as he trudged toward the house, under the dense shadows of the trees that lined the

driveway. It had been a morbid, and harrying day. Tag ends of thoughts and worries flitted through his mind. Uneasily he remembered Buckley's cryptic remark: "Either Yut Wuen is lying about that telephone call, or--" The detective had left the sentence unfinished, casting a glance at Brill that was as inscrutable as his speech. Nobody believed the Chinaman was deliberately lying. His devotion to his master was well known--a devotion shared by the other servants of the dead man. Police suspicion had failed to connect them in any way with the crime. Apparently none of them had left Reynolds' town house during the day or the night of the murder. Nor had the murder-cottage given up any clues. No tracks had been found on the hard earth, no fingerprints on the gun other than the dead man's nor any except Buckley's on the light switch. If Buckley had had any luck in trying to trace the mysterious phone call, he had not divulged anything.

Brill remembered, with a twinge of nervousness, the way in which they had looked at him, those inscrutable Orientals. Their features had been immobile, but in their dark eyes had gleamed suspicion and a threat. He had seen it in the eyes of Yut Wuen, the stocky yellow man; of Ali, the Egyptian, a lean, sinewy statue of bronze; of Jugra Singh, the tall, broad shouldered, turbaned Sikh. They had not spoken their thoughts; but their eyes had followed him, hot and burning, like beasts of prey.

Brill turned from the meandering driveway to cut across the lawn. As he passed under the black shadow of the trees, something sudden, clinging and smothering, enveloped his head, and steely arms locked fiercely about him. His reaction was as instinctive and violent as that of a trapped leopard. He exploded into a galvanized burst of frantic action, a bucking heave that tore the stifling cloak from his head, and freed his arms from the arms that pinioned him. But another pair of arms hung like grim Fate to his legs, and figures surged in on him from the darkness. He could not tell the nature of his assailants; they were like denser, moving shadows in the blackness.

Staggering, fighting for balance, he lashed out blindly, felt the jolt of a solid hit shoot up his arm, and saw one of the shadows sway and pitch backward. His other arm was caught in a savage grasp and twisted up behind his back so violently that he felt as if the tendons were being ripped from their roots. Hot breath hissed in his ear, and bending his head forward, he jerked it backward again with all the power of his thick neck muscles. He felt the back of his skull crash into something softer--a man's face. There was a groan, and the crippling grip on his imprisoned arm relaxed. With a desperate wrench he tore away, but the arms that clung to his legs tripped him. He pitched headlong, spreading his arms to break his fall, and even before his fingers touched the ground, something exploded in his brain, showering a suddenly starless night of blackness with red sparks that were engulfed abruptly in formless oblivion.

Joel Brill's first conscious thought was that he was being tossed about in an open boat on a stormy sea. Then as his dazed mind cleared, he realized that he was lying in an automobile which was speeding along an uneven road. His head throbbed; he was bound hand and foot, and blanketed in some kind of a cloak. He could see nothing; could hear nothing but the purr of the racing motor. Bewilderment clouded his mind as he sought for a clue to the identity of the kidnappers. Then a sudden suspicion brought out the cold sweat on his skin.

The car lurched to a halt. Powerful hands lifted him, cloak and all, and he felt himself being carried over a short stretch of level ground, and apparently up a step or so. A key grated in a lock, a door rasped on its hinges. Those carrying him advanced; there was a click, and light shone through the folds of the cloth over Brill's head. He felt himself being lowered onto what felt like a bed. Then the cloth was ripped away, and he blinked in the glare of the light. A cold premonitory shudder passed over him.

He was lying on the bed in the room in which James Reynolds had died. And about him stood, arms folded, three grim and silent shapes: Yut Wuen, Ali the Egyptian, and Jugra Singh. There was dried blood on the Chinaman's yellow face, and his lip was cut. A dark blue bruise showed on Jugra Singh's jaw.

"The *sahib* awakes," said the Sikh, in his perfect English.

"What the devil's the idea, Jugra?" demanded Brill, trying to struggle to a sitting posture. "What do you mean by this? Take these ropes off me--" His voice trailed away, a shaky resonance of futility as he read the meaning in the hot dark eyes that regarded him.

"In this room our master met his doom," said Ali.

" Youcalled him forth," said Yut Wuen.

"But I didn't!" raged Brill, jerking wildly at the cords which cut into his flesh. "Damn it, I knew nothing about it!"

"Your voice came over the wire and our master followed it to his death," said Jugra Singh.

A panic of helplessness swept over Joel Brill. He felt like a man beating at an insurmountable wall--the wall of inexorable Oriental fatalism, of conviction unchangeable. If even Buckley believed that somehow he, Joel Brill, was connected with Reynolds' death, how was he to convince these immutable Orientals? He fought down an impulse to hysteria.

"The detective, Buckley, was with me all evening," he said, in a voice unnatural from his efforts at control. "He has told you that he did not see me touch a phone; nor did I leave his sight. I could not have killed my friend, your master, because while he was being killed, I was either in the library of the Corinthian Club, or driving from there with Buckley."

"How it was done, we do not know," answered the Sikh, tranquilly. "The ways of the *sahibs* are beyond us. But we *know* that somehow, in some manner, you caused our master's death. And we have brought you here to expiate your crime."

"You mean to murder me?" demanded Brill, his flesh crawling.

"If a *sahib* judge sentenced you, and a *sahib* hangman dropped you through a black trap, white men would call it execution. So it is execution we work upon you, not murder."

Brill opened his mouth, then closed it, realizing the utter futility of argument. The whole affair was like a fantastic nightmare from which he would presently awaken.

Ali came forward with something, the sight of which shook Brill with a nameless foreboding. It was a wire cage, in which a great gaunt rat squealed and bit at the wires. Yut Wuen laid upon a card table a copper bowl, furnished with a slot on each side of the rim, to one of which was made fast a long leather strap. Brill turned suddenly sick.

"These are the tools of execution, *sahib* ," said Jugra Singh, somberly. "That bowl shall be laid on your naked belly, the strap drawn about your body and made fast so that the bowl shall not slip. Inside the bowl the rat will be imprisoned. He is ravenous with hunger, wild with fear and rage. For a while he will only run about the bowl, treading on your flesh. But with irons hot from the fire, we shall gradually heat the bowl, until, driven by pain, the rat begins to gnaw his way *out* . He can not gnaw through copper; he can gnaw through flesh--through flesh and muscles and intestines and bones, *sahib* ."

Brill wet his lips three times before he found voice to speak.

"You'll hang for this!" he gasped, in a voice he did not himself recognize.

"If it be the will of Allah," assented Ali calmly. "This is your fate; what ours is, no man can say. It is the will of Allah that you die with a rat in your bowels. If it is Allah's will, we shall die on the gallows. Only Allah knows."

Brill made no reply. Some vestige of pride still remained to him. He set his jaw hard, feeling that if he opened his mouth to speak, to reason, to argue, he would collapse into shameful shrieks and entreaties. One was useless as the other, against the abysmal fatalism of the Orient.

Ali set the cage with its grisly Occupant on the table beside the copper bowl--without warning the light went out.

In the darkness Brill's heart began to pound suffocatingly. The Orientals stood still, patiently, expecting the light to come on again. But Brill instinctively felt that the stage was set for some drama darker and more hideous than that which menaced him. Silence reigned; somewhere off in the woods a night bird lifted a drowsy note. There was a faint scratching sound, somewhere--

"The electric torch," muttered a ghostly voice which Brill recognized as Jugra Singh's. "I laid it on the card table. Wait!"

He heard the Sikh fumbling in the dark; but he was watching the window, a square of dim, star-flecked sky blocked out of blackness. And as Brill watched, he saw something dark and bulky rear up in that square. Etched against the stars he saw a misshapen head, vague monstrous shoulders.

A scream sounded from inside the room, the crash of a wildly thrown missile. On the instant there was a scrambling sound, and the object blotted out the square of starlight, then vanished from it. *It was inside the room.*

Brill, lying frozen in his cords, heard all Hell and bedlam break loose in that dark room. Screams, shouts, strident cries of agony mingled with the smashing of furniture, the impact of blows, and a hideous, worrying, tearing sound that made Brill's flesh crawl. Once the battling pack staggered past the window, but Brill made out only a dim writhing of limbs, the pale glint of steel, and the terrible blaze of a pair of eyes he knew belonged to none of his three captors.

Somewhere a man was moaning horribly, his gasps growing weaker and weaker. There was a last convulsion of movement, the groaning impact of a heavy body; then the starlight in the window was for an instant blotted out again, and silence reigned once more in the cottage on the lake shore; silence broken only by the death gasps in the dark, and the labored panting of a wounded man.

Brill heard some one stumbling and floundering in the darkness, and it was from this one that the racking, panting was emanating. A circle of light flashed on, and in it Brill saw the blood-smeared face of Jugra Singh.

The light wandered erratically away, dancing crazily about the walls. Brill heard the Sikh blundering across the room, moving like a drunken man, or like one wounded unto death. The flash shone full in the scientist's face, blinding him. Fingers tugged awkwardly at his cords, a knife edge was dragged across them, slicing skin as well as hemp.

Jugra Singh sank to the floor. The flash thumped beside him and went out. Brill groped for him, found his

shoulder. The cloth was soaked with what Brill knew was blood.

"You spoke truth, *sahib*," the Sikh whispered. "How the call came in the likeness of your voice, I do not know. But I know, now, what slew Reynolds, *sahib*. After all these years--but they never forget, though the broad sea lies between. Beware! The fiend may return. The gold--the gold was cursed--I told Reynolds, *sahib* --had he heeded me, he--"

A sudden welling of blood drowned the laboring voice. Under Brill's hand the great body stiffened and twisted in a brief convulsion, then went limp.

Groping on the floor, the scientist failed to find the flashlight. He groped along the wall, found the switch and flooded the cottage with light.

Turning back into the room, a stifled cry escaped his lips.

Jugra Singh lay slumped near the bed; huddled in a corner was Yut Wuen, his yellow hands, palms upturned, limp on the floor at his sides; Ali sprawled face down in the middle of the room. All three were dead. Throats, breasts and bellies were slashed to ribbons; their garments were in strips, and among the rags hung bloody tatters of flesh. Yut Wuen had been disemboweled, and the gaping wounds of the others were like those of sheep after a mountain lion has ranged through the fold.

A blackjack still stuck in Yut Wuen's belt. Ali's dead hand clutched a knife, but it was unstained. Death had struck them before they could use their weapons. But on the floor near Jugra Singh lay a great curved dagger, and it was red to the hilt. Bloody stains led across the floor and up over the window sill. Brill found the flash, snapped it on, and leaned out the window, playing the white beam on the ground outside. Dark, irregular splotches showed, leading off toward the dense woods.

With the flash in one hand and the Sikh's knife in the other, Brill followed those stains. At the edge of the trees he came upon a track, and the short hairs lifted on his scalp. A foot, planted in a pool of blood, had limned its imprint in crimson on the hard loam. And the foot, bare and splay, was that of a human.

That print upset vague theories of a feline or anthropoid killer, stirred nebulous thoughts at the back of his mind--dim and awful race memories of semi-human ghouls, of werewolves who walked like men and slew like beasts.

A low groan brought him to a halt, his flesh crawling. Under the black trees in the silence, that sound was pregnant with grisly probabilities. Gripping the knife firmly, he flashed the beam ahead of him. The thin light wavered, then focused on a black heap that was not part of the forest.

Brill bent over the figure and stood transfixed, transported back across the years and across the world to another wilder, grimmer woodland.

It was a naked black man that lay at his feet, his glassy eyes reflecting the waning light. His legs were short, bowed and gnarled, his arms long, his shoulders abnormally broad, his shaven head set plump between them without visible neck. That head was hideously malformed; the forehead projected almost into a peak, while the back of the skull was unnaturally flattened. White paint banded face, shoulders and breast. But it was at the creature's fingers which Brill looked longest. At first glance they seemed monstrously deformed. Then he saw that those hands were furnished with long curving steel hooks, sharp-pointed, and keen-edged on the concave side. To each finger one of these barbarous weapons was made fast, and those fingers, like the hooks clotted and smeared with blood, twitched exactly as the talons of a leopard twitch.

A light step brought him round. His dimming light played on a tall figure, and Brill mumbled: "John Galt!" in no great surprise. He was so numbed by bewilderment that the strangeness of the man's presence did not occur to him.

"What in God's name is this?" demanded the tall explorer, taking the light from Brill's hand and directing it on the mangled shape. "What in Heaven's name is that?"

"A black nightmare from Africa!" Brill found his tongue at last, and speech came in a rush. "An Egbo! A leopard man! I learned of them when I was on the West Coast. He belongs to a native cult which worships the leopard. They take a male infant and subject his head to pressure, to make it deformed; and he is brought up to believe that the spirit of a leopard inhabits his body. He does the bidding of the cult's head, which mainly consists of executing the enemies of the cult. He is, in effect, a human leopard!"

"What's he doing here?" demanded Galt, in seeming incredulity.

"God knows. But he must have been the thing that killed Reynolds. He killed Reynolds' three servants tonight--would have killed me, too, I suppose, but Jugra Singh wounded him, and he evidently dragged himself away like a wild beast to die in the jungle--"

Galt seemed curiously uninterested in Brill's stammering narrative.

"Sure he's dead?" he muttered, bending closer to flash the light into the hideous face. The illumination was dim; the battery was swiftly burning out.

As Brill was about to speak, the painted face was briefly convulsed. The glazed eyes gleamed as with a last surge of life. A clawed hand stirred, lifted feebly up toward Galt. A few gutturals seeped through the blubbery lips; the fingers writhed weakly, slipped from the iron talons, which the black man lifted, as if trying to hand them to Galt. Then he shuddered, sank back and lay still. He had been stabbed under the heart, and only a beast-like vitality had carried him so far.

Galt straightened and faced Brill, turning the light on him. A beat of silence cut between them, in which the atmosphere was electric with tension.

"You understand the Ekoi dialect?" It was more an assertion than a question.

Brill's heart was pounding, a new bewilderment vying with a rising wrath. "Yes," he answered shortly.

"What did that fool say?" softly asked Galt.

Brill set his teeth and stubbornly took the plunge reason cried out against. "He said," he replied between his teeth, "'Master, take my tools to the tribe, and tell them of our vengeance; they will give you what I promised you.'"

Even as he ground out the words, his powerful body crouched, his nerves taut for the grapple. But before he could move, the black muzzle of an automatic trained on his belly.

"Too bad you had to understand that death-bed confession, Brill," said Galt, coolly. "I don't want to kill you. I've kept blood off *my* hands so far through this affair. Listen, you're a poor man, like most scientists--how'd you consider cutting in on a fortune? Wouldn't that be preferable to getting a slug through your guts and being planted alongside those yellow-bellied stiff's down in Reynolds' shack for

them to get the blame?"

"No man wants to die," answered Brill, his gaze fixed on the light in Galt's hand--the glow which was rapidly turning redder and dimmer.

"Good!" snapped Galt. "I'll give you the low down. Reynolds got his money in the Kameroons--stole gold from the Ekoi, which they had stored in the ju-ju hut; he killed a priest of the Egbo cult in getting away. Jugra Singh was with him. But they didn't get all the gold. And after that the Ekoi took good care to guard it so nobody could steal what was left.

"I knew this fellow, Guja, when I was in Africa. I was after the Ekoi gold then, but I never had a chance to locate it. I met Guja a few months ago, again. He'd been exiled from his tribe for some crime, had wandered to the Coast and been picked up with some more natives who were brought to America for exhibition in the World's Fair.

"Guja was mad to get back to his people, and he spilled the whole story of the gold. Told me that if he could kill Reynolds, his tribe would forgive him. He knew that Reynolds was somewhere in America, but he was helpless as a child to find him. I offered to arrange his meeting with the gold-thief, if Guja would agree to give me some of the gold his tribe hoarded.

"He swore by the skull of the great leopard. I brought him secretly into these hills, and hid him up yonder in a shack the existence of which nobody suspects. It took me a wretched time to teach him just what he was to do--he'd no more brains than an ape. Night after night I went through the thing with him, until he learned the procedure: to watch in the hills until he saw a light flash in Reynolds' shack. Then steal down there, jerk the switch--and kill. These leopard men can see like cats at night.

"I called Reynolds up myself; it wasn't hard to imitate your voice. I used to do impersonations in vaudeville. While Guja was tearing the life out of Reynolds, I was dining at a well-known night club, in full sight of all.

"I came here tonight to smuggle him out of the country. But his blood-lust must have betrayed him. When he saw the light flash on in the cottage again, it must have started a train of associations that led him once more to the cottage, to kill whoever he found there. I saw the tag-end of the business--saw him stagger away from the shack, and then you follow him.

"Now then, I've shot the works. Nobody knows I'm mixed up in this business, but you. Will you keep your mouth shut and take a share of the Ekoi gold?"

The glow went out. In the sudden darkness, Brill, his pent-up feelings exploding at last, yelled: "Damn you, no! You murdering dog!" and sprang aside. The pistol cracked, an orange jet sliced the darkness, and the bullet fanned Brill's ear as he threw the heavy knife blindly. He heard it rattle futilely through the bushes, and stood frozen with the realization that he had lost his desperate gamble.

But even as he braced himself against the tearing impact of the bullet he expected, a sudden beam drilled the blackness, illuminating the convulsed features of John Galt.

"Don't move, Galt; I've got the drop on you."

It was the voice of Buckley. With a snarl, Galt took as desperate a chance as Brill had taken. He wheeled toward the source of the light, snapping down his automatic. But even as he did so, the detective's .45 crashed, and outlined against the brief glare, Galt swayed and fell like a tall tree struck by

lightning.

"Dead?" asked the scientist, mechanically.

"Bullet tore through his forearm and smashed his shoulder," grunted Buckley. "Just knocked out temporarily. He'll live to decorate the gallows."

"You--you heard--?" Brill stuttered.

"Everything. I was just coming around the bend of the lake shore and saw a light in Reynolds' cottage, then your flash bobbing among the trees. I came sneaking through the bushes just in time to hear you give your translation of the nigger's dying words. I've been prowling around this lake all night."

"You suspected Galt all the time?"

The detective grinned wryly.

"I ought to say yes, and establish myself as a super sleuth. But the fact is, I suspected *you* all the time. That's why I came up here tonight--trying to figure out your connection with the murder. That alibi of yours was so iron-clad it looked phony to me. I had a sneaking suspicion that I'd bumped into a master-mind trying to put over the 'perfect crime.' I apologize! I've been reading too many detective stories lately!"

THE END

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