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*Hamilton shot as Rob
screamed and reared...*

TERROR'S NIGHT

*To friend and enemy he issued
one inexorable challenge—the
unseen killer of terror moun-
tain—"Who dies there?"*

By I. R. Austin

HAMILTON was just rinsing off his supper dishes when the bell on the wall jangled sharply. He counted the rings. Two short, one long; it was his station. In two strides he was across the cabin and had picked up the receiver.

"Tolmie Peak lookout," he said.

"Longmire calling. That you, Hamilton?"

He laughed. "Now who else'd be up here on this forsaken peak?"

"Thought it might be Farrell. He oughta be there."

"He's not coming tonight, is he?"

"Yeah, with your supplies. He picked them up in Carbon River and was heading for Pete's to get the horses. We tried to get him at Pete's. Listen, Hamilton, there's a killer up there—"

"You're telling me," cut in Hamilton. "I've seen him!"

"Tonight?"

"No, but he's roaming these woods since Saturday."

"Who'n the hell—"

"The cat," said Hamilton. "A nice big black mountain cat. I haven't had my face outside the station after dark since I saw him."

"Not the cat, Hamilton. McCloney's up there."

Hamilton let out a low whistle. "When did he get out?"

"When—or how—we don't know. We just know he turned up in Carbon River tonight. Somebody called us. Said McCloney's been there all evening drinking and shooting off his mouth as how he's gunning for Farrell. Then somebody let out that Farrell's over there packing in your supplies tonight, and McCloney lit out faster'n rabbit—carrying a gun."

A cold shiver ran up Hamilton's spine. "What time did Farrell leave?"

"We don't know. Nobody answers at Pete's. Either they're both out loading the horses or maybe Pete's coming up with Farrell."

"McCloney's not the kind to jump two men. One unarmed man is more his game. You think I ought to start down?"

"No, with the cat loose and McCloney skunking around with a rifle, you'd better stick close to the station. We'll try Pete's again."

Hamilton hung the receiver up thoughtfully. He lifted his rifle from the hook where it hung on the wall, propped it carefully against the door. Then he snapped off the light that lit the second story cabin room which served as kitchen and bedroom, and peered out through the glass that completely circled the upper half of the lookout station.

The blackness made him dizzy. He could hardly make out the railing that ran around the outside catwalk. On a bright night he could see a good part of the trail that wound up the rocky climb from Eunice Lake. It was the only trail a horse could take that last mile up, but there were numerous foot trails, dangerous and slippery, but navigable if a man knew the territory. Tonight, when even the stars were hidden behind layers of grey, rolling clouds, a man could cover the whole distance from Eunice on the open switchbacks without the slightest fear of detection until he hit the open space at the top, that two hundred feet of rocky, shale-covered ground. It was on this area that Hamilton concentrated. Dark as it was, he counted on spotting any sign of movement. Ten minutes passed and the night was still quiet.

Hamilton stretched out on his cot. He would have liked to read, but he knew better than to turn the light on. A man outlined in yellow glass would make easy pickings for a rifle. McCloney might be hunting Farrell, but he certainly hadn't forgotten Hamilton's part in his arrest two years ago.

It had been Hamilton who had first stumbled upon the carcass of the buck, shot between the eyes, but it had been Farrell, veteran of the woods and familiar with the mountain terrain, who had been assigned to the job of tracking down the killer. Forty miles of woods and mountains is no place to go looking for a man who shoots between the eyes unless you know every inch of that territory,

know where a horse can climb, know which passes are clear of snow, know the destination of each of those winding switchbacks, the tricky mountain streams, know where you'll turn a corner and face a sheer drop, and most important, know the likely haunts of a lone hunter out for illegal game. But it hadn't taken him long to track down McCloney and his cabin, hidden away up almost to the foot of the Edmunds Glacier—the cabin which served as a cache for nearly a hundred skins, dried, tanned and ready to sell in Canada. The three day trip from the cabin back to Ranger's headquarters must have been tough. No one ever got the whole story. All they knew was that Farrell turned up in Longmire with a bullet still lodged in his right shoulder, grim but still captor.

Hamilton looked at his watch. Nine o'clock. If Farrell had picked up the supplies at the general store, six would have been the latest. Allow an hour to drive to Pete's, a half hour to load. An hour and a half was plenty of time to make the mountain trail of three miles to the lookout. Hamilton was getting fidgety lying there in the dark. Once he thought he heard something. He waited. It was quiet. He thought, *by this time they ought to be at least to Eunice*. He moved across the room and noiselessly slid back the bolt. Cautiously he stepped out onto the catwalk. The night was still.

Suddenly he gripped the railing and listened hard. He heard the echoes. One shot about a mile down, he estimated. It was hard to tell with the echoes still sounding. Why just one shot? Because Farrell wasn't carrying a gun?

IT TOOK Hamilton half a second to clear his mind, and another half to spin back into the cabin for his coat, gun, and flashlight. Halfway down the wooden steps he stopped, swung back up and reentered the cabin. He lifted the receiver from its hook and listened. The

line was dead. Hamilton's eyes narrowed and his lips were set. McCloney was not only out there shooting down a man in the dark, but he had made sure no help would get through to Longmire by phone. This time Hamilton took the steps three at a time. Rob was itching nervously around in his stall. Hamilton swung his saddle on the big horse and backed him out.

Rob knew the trail down even in pitch darkness. He picked his way warily, stepping over the loose stones and feeling his way close to the inside. Hamilton held his rifle in position with one hand, and with the other hand the flashlight, ready to break the darkness. He knew the horse would sense the cat before he was dangerously near. The light might keep the cat away if it surprised him. The woods were ominously still, as if all the gentler animals had cleared the stage for the black killer. It was only the cat that Hamilton was worried about. McCloney would probably beat it back to Carbon River and head for Canada.

There was a dankness about the woods. It smelled of decaying leaves and dirty snow. Even in late June there were still patches here and there dotting the mountainside with its dingy white. Hamilton sat stiffly, not daring to relax his watch for even a moment. Somewhere along the path or halfway down the side lay a dark, inert figure. He had to spot it. It might be anyplace between here and Eunice Lake.

The cat would smell blood. A wounded man made easy prey. Hamilton shivered at the picture in his mind. He had to find Farrell soon.

Suddenly Rob stopped. He shied to the right, dangerously near space. Hamilton could see nothing. He turned the light on and flashed it into the woods. There was the frightened whinny of another horse, and Rob answered. Then the fast, muffled beats of hoofs on leaves and a horse ap-

peared from the woods. Hamilton recognized the black mare. It was one of Pete's. Not a pack horse, but one of his best riders. She was breathing hard, but came to a stand when he grabbed her reins. Whatever had frightened her wasn't close now, or she wouldn't have stopped running. Probably the shot had set her off. He whipped the reins around in back and they started on.

Half a mile later the mare began to pull. They slowed, and Hamilton swung the light down to the right. It was a sheer drop. The path ahead was clear, and the woods revealed nothing but a hopeless tangle of underbrush. The mare was pulling hard on the reins, so he let her go and swung off Rob. There was something in the woods, but the mare went no further than the edge. She whinnied softly as Hamilton waded into the brush. Not far in, he saw a flattened piece of ground where something had lain. A trail of broken branches led further into the woods. Hamilton was jumpy. The forest seemed to be closing in. There was a crashing behind him. He whirled, and the flashlight shattered against a tree.

"Damn mare," he muttered. "This is a hell of a place to be without a light." There was no use looking further. He turned and began to feel his way back. He hadn't come in far, he estimated; a hundred yards maybe.

He was close to the horses when it hap-

pened. His foot came down on something soft. It rolled as he stepped harder. For a moment he stopped breathing and thinking, then he forced himself to reach down. He felt sick as he ran his hand over the body. It seemed to be one piece. The hand was warm.

"Farrell?"

The man moaned.

"Farrell, it's me, Hamilton. Can you talk?" He heard Farrell catch a breath. "Can I lift you? Where did he get you?"

The figure moaned again. The speech was thick.

"I can't hear you, Farrell. Where are you bleeding? I lost my light."

The wounded man was trying to say something. "Bro—broken," he whispered.

Hamilton quickly felt the leg. It seemed all right, but the body was bent at a strange angle from the hip.

"I heard a shot," said Hamilton.

"Ca—cat," the whisper died out and the form was again limp.

"The cat!" breathed Hamilton. Then it hadn't been McCloney shooting. The mare must have thrown Farrell a good thirty yards. *The shot?* he asked himself. *Farrell must have shot at the cat before the mare bolted.*

He had to get him out of there. But how, with a broken hip, he asked himself. What a tumble! It's a wonder his neck wasn't broken. He only hoped the shot had scared the cat to a safe distance.

There was certainly no danger in the near vicinity now, or the mare wouldn't have come barging in after him. But Hamilton hadn't forgotten McCloney. He whistled for Rob. The big horse came sidling up and stood still while Hamilton lifted the limp figure onto the saddle.

There was no question of which way to go. Pete's was over two miles as compared to less than a mile back to the lookout, but there was nothing at the station to cope with a broken hip. Pete at least had a car. They had to go on.

Hamilton was nervous on the mare. He didn't like the way she skittered. She was a rider, not a mountain horse, and not used to the smell of wild animal or the tricky trails of the switchbacks. Rob was setting an easy pace, jogging along easily in the dark, his limp cargo rising and falling with the gait. Rob was as surefooted as a mountain goat, but still he took it slow. Minutes seemed like hours. It was only five minutes to Eunice, but to Hamilton it seemed endless till they rounded the last bend and came upon the little lake. It looked like a smooth, flat table in the dark. They skirted only a corner of the open section, but Hamilton didn't breathe until they were again into the woods. With only the cat to worry about, the woods seemed evil, but with the threat of McCloney again, their en-folding darkness seemed like a protecting cloak.

JUST EXACTLY when Hamilton became aware of the uneasiness of the horses, he wasn't sure. It was gradual. But now even Rob was acting strangely. Once he stopped and turned his black nose in towards the woods. He sniffed, then as if to warn Hamilton, he turned his head back and whinnied. There was no doubt in Hamilton's mind. The cat was near.

Hamilton raised his rifle, his finger locked over the trigger. The horses were

moving, but they snorted noisily. Hamilton kept his eyes glued to the shadowy wall of trees—waiting. His arm was steady, but the blood pounded in his throat.

It happened in a split second. A long form hurtling through the air ahead. Hamilton shot just as Rob screamed and reared. The cat fell back and Rob regained his footing. At first Hamilton thought he'd hit the horse. The cat was crouching now, ready to spring again. Hamilton fired once more. The mare bolted and he grabbed the pommel of the saddle and hung on.

They covered a mile in what seemed a few short minutes. Rob was no longer in sight. *He must be hurt*, thought Hamilton, or he'd never travel at that speed. The mare began to slow after another mile, because the pine needles had turned to rocks and leaves as the path neared the bottom. The great form of Rob was again visible picking his way over the logs on the marshy end of Mowich Lake. The light was on in Pete's cabin, and Hamilton breathed a prayer of relief.

The door swung open as they came into the clearing. Pete stood outlined in the light, squinting at the arrivals. Hamilton tried to call their usual "Hallo," but his throat was too dry. He swung off the mare and came into the arc of light.

"What the hell happened, Hamilton?" asked Pete.

"It's Farrell," he answered. "Help me get him off."

"Farrell! You're out of your mind! Farrell's inside sleeping. We've spent the evening looking for this damn mare and my best saddle." Pete stepped off the porch and grabbed the reins of the big horse, swinging him around into the light. "Your line's dead. Been trying to call all—It's McCloney! Hamilton, you've got McCloney here!"

Hamilton sat down on the steps. He wanted to laugh, but no sound came forth.