

# Doom Mountain



Automatic ready, he started toward the sleeping man.

By Maitland Scott

*"A rat without the brains of a rat—Drew will soon be caught." That was what the radio announced. But Joe Drew was safe in the snowbound mountains — with \$50,000 loot—and a ruse that was sharp as a rat's fangs.*

JOE DREW'S eyes, slitted against the driving flakes of snow, glared at the husky back of the big man who trudged sturdily at the head of their pack mule. Hour after hour, for several days now, Joe Drew had watched that back, and as the interminable minutes passed, the fire in his eyes flashed more brightly.

Drew wanted to murder Roome for the other half of the loot they shared. But if he did, he knew he'd be hopelessly lost in the baffling wilderness of the high Rockies. No,

he couldn't kill Harry Roome, the big north-country giant—yet. And to turn back would be to walk straight into the arms of the law—and a seat in the electric chair at Sing Sing.

Far away in New York State, Joe Drew was wanted for a murder rap he knew he could not beat. He swore under his breath. After the bank robbery he and Roome had recently pulled, their descriptions were given by a wounded teller, who had lived—damn him—to tell of their sizes, builds, voices .... and the face of Joe Drew, wanted for a double murder

in New York.

Joe Drew stumbled on over the rocky trail that was now soft-carpeted underfoot with white snow. Silently he cursed, again and again, the treacherous fastenings which had let his mask fall as he was blasting lead at the dumb teller who had tried to draw a rod on him in that hick mining-town bank. Since then, a radio-controlled dragnet of watchful police, state troopers and G-men made capture so sure in any civilized place that he shuddered—shuddered at thought of the little green door that led into Sing Sing's death house.

Envy the virile strides of the northwoods man ahead of him. Drew clung to a rope that bound canvas-covered provisions to the back of the mule. Well, there would be a long winter ahead of them. Roome had said they'd be snowed in for weeks at a time. Yes—he'd figure some way to have Roome's half of the bank loot and still manage a way of getting out of the wilderness. He wanted that money—fifty grand was a hell of a lot more than twenty-five.

"A rat without the brains of a rat, Drew would soon be caught." That's what he'd heard coming from the loudspeaker of an outpost saloon in the foothills. Call him a rat, would they? Well, he wasn't going to get caught. He'd show them.

Harry Roome abruptly yanked the mule to a halt, came around its flank and leaned there near Drew as he pulled a pint of whisky from a pocket of his mackinaw. At a gulp he swallowed the few ounces of liquor remaining in the bottom of the bottle. Drew marveled at the stamina of a man who could drink a quart of whisky, as Roome had, in about five hours. Impelled by the bitter cold, half a pint was all that he had been able to handle.

"Feelin' a wee bit drunk," commented Roome. "But it's pretty cold—good ways below *zero* now."

Roome eyed Drew for a moment with his simple, almost blank blue eyes, then said: "Ain't talked much, Joe, but I didn't figger when I joined in with you to rob that bank, that my partner was wanted for murder.... And you tried to kill that teller, too .... Well, I went partners with you, so I'll stick with you. You'll be safe enough with me."

For a moment fear clutched at Joe Drew. Then he read in Roome's eyes and voice that the man meant what he said. He'd be safe enough with him. And Drew's hand fell away from the butt of the automatic in the right pocket of his coat.

"It was him or me, Harry," he said.

HARRY ROOME merely grunted, went to the head of the mule and started pushing onward and upward again, winding their tortuous way over what seemed a strange, awesome netherworld to Joe Drew. For there was a weird stillness here that he had never known, a silence not even slightly broken by the fall of infinite, myriad flakes of dead-white snow—snow that hid the breath-taking drop of thousands of feet over the side of the twisting trail along which they struggled. Here was a terrifying world where rocky, half-white crags and brooding solemn-topped pines seemed to govern a province in which strange things could happen.

Joe Drew shivered, not from the biting nip of sub-zero weather, and wished fervently that he was back on Tenth Avenue in New York City. Then he shivered again, at thought of the death house with its hideous green door at Sing Sing, and forced his wabbling legs to quicken their pace.

"Got a swig left in your bottle, Joe?" Harry Roome's voice called back to him through the swirling snow. "Don't want to undo the pack for more."

Drew's teeth chattered with the cold as he answered: "Yes—sure."

"All right, we'll stop apiece on an' have some. Won't have to camp tonight. We can make it before nightfall."

Joe Drew was thinking that already it seemed nightfall, so hazy it was from the thick fall of snow from a gray-blanketed, barely visible sky, when the idea struck him—a brilliant idea, he told himself.

Swiftly he worked, fishing into an inside pocket, then juggling a capsule into the remaining half-pint of whisky in the left-hand pocket of his mackinaw, careful that Roome would not see him do it. Joe Drew had often found it handy for his purposes to always carry a supply of Mickey Finns about with him.

Presently Harry Roome again halted the mule and pointed to a high slope just ahead, saying: "Joe, we're almost there. A quarter mile beyond that ridge the cabin sets in a small hollow. If we didn't have the mule, we'd have to carry the grub over by stages."

"An' how much longer will it take us to get there?" Joe Drew asked, cautiously.

"Oh, 'bout fifteen to twenty minutes.... Let's have a pull at that bottle." Without enough heavy clothing for this weather, it's a good thing we were able to get a stock of moonshine. We'd never have made it, otherwise. But then, we were damned lucky to get away from the law."

By this time Harry Roome was downing most of the liquor in Joe Drew's bottle. After that, Roome said: "We'll be safe in that cabin. Don't think anybody knows 'bout it except me. Found Uncle Henry dead in it last spring—buried him nearby. He was a regular hermit. Trapped 'round these parts. Brought his pelts in once an' a while, but never made friends with nobody. We'll find—that once we get settled—we—"

Harry Roome's voice trailed off, his knees wobbled, and then his big frame plumped down softly into the snow. The Mickey Finn

had taken its toll.

For a brief moment Joe Drew was assailed with an overwhelming feeling of loneliness and panic as the last sound of Roome's voice dissipated in the air, leaving a doomful void of intense silence. Then greed was the goad that made Drew act swiftly, commence to carry out the measures of his plan.

He bent swiftly, secured the heavy packet of bank notes from Harry Roome's inside pocket. Then after securing them he started off, running, scrambling up the side of the ridge over which Roome had said the cabin lay. Normally, Drew knew, that Mickey Finn would keep an average man out for about an hour and a half, but Harry Roome was mighty husky. He wasn't taking any chances—he must hurry, hurry....

**J**OE DREW was out of breath and nearly spent when he reached the solidly built little cabin in the hollow, noting with satisfaction the big, snow-covered hump in back that was many cords of hewn wood—fuel. He kicked open the door of the cabin, entered its musty, dark interior.

Working by the light of a candle and with the aid of a hunting knife, Joe Drew hid Harry Roome's share of the loot—and his own—beneath a section of floor-boarding in a corner of the cabin. Then, using the greatest pains, he obliterated all signs of his entrance into the cabin. After that he shut the door behind him and sped back over the ridge to where Harry Roome still lay, a white, shroudlike sheet from the fast-falling snow already covering him.

Joe Drew smiled twistedly. So—he was a rat without the brains of a rat, eh?

For a moment Joe Drew hesitated, knowing the rest of the task ahead of him would be a difficult one; for he was a small man, and Harry Roome was huge. He was tempted to kill and bury him then and there. But the terrifying thought of being lost and

alone was too much. So by dint of taxing every ounce of his strength to the fullest, he finally managed to get Harry Roome straddled over the back of the mule, face down.

Two hours later, Joe Drew was camped miles back along the way they had come. He was trying to drink enough hot coffee to keep from freezing despite the warmth of a crackling fire he had built. Drew was miserably cold, for he had had to hold off building that fire until as close as he could judge to the time Roome would regain consciousness. Sequence of time had to appear as he would present it to his partner.

Joe Drew had camped as he had learned to from Harry Roome, using spruce bows as a shelter in a wind-protected angle of some high rocks. And Roome now lay wrapped in blankets near the fire, still unconscious from added doses of Mickey Finn and whisky that had been forced down his throat in carefully figured proportions.

From time to time Joe Drew glanced down to their trail along the ravine, noting the fall of snow. Finally he judged that the time was right. Yes—when they reached the cabin, all traces of his footprints would be gone. Now for the hardest part of his plan—after he brought Roome back to life....

When the big man had stirred, sat up, blinked and groaned, Joe Drew handed him a tin cup of hot coffee, saying: "Now, Harry, just take it easy and drink that before you start asking any questions."

Roome eyed Drew steadily for a brief moment, then applied himself to getting the steaming liquid down his gullet. After that he crawled from the shelter, followed by Drew, and looked around him.

"What're we doin' way back here. Joe?" he asked, simply.

"You got awful drunk, Harry."

The big man's almost childish eyes showed that he was startled, then shocked, as

he grunted: "Wouldn't have believed it. Must have been pretty bad moonshine."

"Yes, sure must have," agreed Joe Drew. "You were off your nut, an' I had some job chasin' you way back here. Then you wanted to fight, and you took my dough away from me. I've been nursing you along here by the fire for some time."

Harry Roome's eyes widened, and slowly his hand crept below his mackinaw and came away quickly.

"Mine's gone. You keepin' it for me?"

Joe Drew's heart began to pound fearfully as he said: "No, Harry. You had both my money and yours in your hands when you staggered and fell halfway over the edge, down there—" Joe Drew pointed to the edge of the gorge a few yards from where they stood—"and you dropped all the dough over the edge while I was pulling you back. I almost had to let you go down there, too, Harry. You're an awful heavy man."

It seemed endless moments to Joe Drew while Harry Roome stared at him. Finally the big man reached out, seized Drew by the wrist, twisted his arm behind him and took away his automatic.

"Maybe I'm wrong—maybe I oughtn't to do this—but I want to search you, Joe," he said.

**A**FTER he had completed his fruitless search, Roome started toward the mule; then he stopped and said: "No, it wouldn't do you no good to hide it there. Maybe you buried it; that's it, maybe you buried it, Joe Drew. I never did trust no murderer."

Joe Drew, working himself into a frenzy of indignation, came back with: "You ungrateful swiggling rat, accusing me of double-crossing you—after I saved your life, after you threw my dough over the side of a mountain. You crazy, drunken fool!"

Roome's eyes showed doubt, then a hint

of abashment, and Joe Drew pulled him quickly by the arm, urging: "Come here, and I'll prove to you where you fell—show you where you dropped the money over."

The two men walked to the edge of the gorge, and Roome bent over and looked down where Drew indicated. Harry Roome's knitted woolen cap was caught five or six feet below on some outgrowing shrubbery. He straightened up. Plainly his simple eyes showed his embarrassment.

"I reckon maybe I done you a wrong, Joe," he said sheepishly.

Joe Drew took in a slow, guarded breath of relief. And from that moment Drew's respect for the big Harry Roome plummeted, although the very guilelessness of the man was what he had been counting on. What a sap not to figure that the cap had been planted! If a hick like that could find his way around in these mountains, why the hell couldn't a smart guy like himself—like Joe Drew—do the same thing? But Drew was afraid to try it—afraid to be alone and lost in this terrifying, storm-ruled wilderness region.

"We better get down there as fast as we can, Harry," he said. "We've got to find that money. It's a fortune you dropped down there!"

Harry Roome shook his head-sadly, dully, as he answered: "Ain't no use. Without the snow, might not never find it. An' with the snow coverin' everything up, there ain't a ghost of a chance. Man, you don't know how far it is down there—maybe seven, eight thousand feet. That money could have got to most any place, what with the wind an' all. Probably no livin' thing'll ever see it."

They stood silent for a moment; then Roome said: "Well, Joe, we're still both wanted men, an' we don't want to freeze, so let's get up to the cabin. Hope you don't hold it all too much against me. When we get out of this, I'll make a good haul some place an' give

you every cent of it—every cent."

Harry Roome stuck out a huge, hamlike paw. Joe Drew said with an air of magnanimity, "It's okay, Joe," and shook hands....

The first week spent in that lonely cabin while a howling blizzard raged outside was not so bad to Joe Drew. Warmth of the logs burning in the stone fireplace gave him a sense of security that was heightened by occasional drinks of moonshine. But the imprisonment soon began to pall on the city-bred man. And Roome, who seemed fully content to whittle sticks of wood while he smoked a rank-smelling pipe, was as much company as a wooden Indian, only pausing in his whittling to heave a boot at a rat that would occasionally venture forth at night into the outer fringe of the circle of light cast by the fire. Finally Drew persuaded Roome to teach him something of the mountain and its surrounding ranges, although they had decided to wait until spring before deciding where they would go.

"I've got to be doin' something to keep from going crazy," Joe Drew had said.

Hour after hour Drew pored over the crude maps that Roome fashioned, and which grew and developed more and more with every added question that he applied. At last one afternoon Joe Drew believed that, with the aid of a compass he could take care of himself, at least nearly as well as a dumb hick like Harry Roome.

THAT NIGHT, when Roome's snores commenced their customary throttling, Joe Drew swung his legs quietly over the side of his bunk, and, automatic in hand, started across the cabin toward the sleeping man, who offered a poor target in the low glow from banked logs is the fireplace. Then the long, keening howl of a wolf sounded outside in the complete stillness that the vanishing blizzard

had left.

Joe Drew stopped, crept back into his bunk. That howl was too much of a sign of what might happen to a man hopelessly lost and freezing to death on some unfamiliar mountain promontory.

But with the coming of daylight, Drew's courage returned, and he determined to kill Roome that day. Joe Drew had thought of merely recovering the bank loot from beneath the floor board and leaving while the big man slept. But he realized that Roome would have the ability to track him down before he had gone far.

After breakfast, Harry Roome, childishly pleased at the passing of the snowstorm, announced that they'd dig their way out.

"If we can get far enough even on snowshoes, maybe we'll sight some game," he said.

They dug a passage out through the snow, and managed to get about a hundred yards from the house. But the snow was too soft and too deep. Joe Drew, panting from the unaccustomed exertion of trying to walk on snowshoes, watched Harry Roome shake his head and gesture toward the cabin.

Joe Drew's muscles tensed. Only one of them would return to the cabin. This was as good a chance as any. No use in having a dead body to sit around with while he was waiting for the time when the snow would give him a chance to leave.

Drew's right hand brought his automatic out of the mackinaw. Yea—a slug right now would topple Roome over the edge of that ravine the way the mule had gone, when a mercy bullet from Roome's Winchester had hit.

The automatic roared in the stillness.

Harry Roome whirled half around, then sank to his knees. Guileless blue eyes looked across the intervening few yards that separated him from Drew. The Winchester, held in

desperately clutching hands, came up. But before Roome could squeeze trigger, the heavy-calibre automatic roared again. Harry Roome fell forward, clear of the edge of the ravine. He whispered, the words carrying to Drew in the still air: "Never should trust a murderer."

Then Harry Roome died, his hands still fiercely clutching the Winchester. Like a fallen giant he lay there, rifle pointed, guarding the snow-deep trail around the edge of the ravine.

Joe Drew returned to the cabin and commenced to wait, wait, wait ... By noon he was wondering if he really could take care of himself half as well as that dumb hick he'd blasted down. These rubes were pretty clever about some things.

When another storm rolled overhead half an hour later, Joe Drew was beginning to get panicky. The darkness that came with the new storm increased his panic and began to make his imagination work overtime. It was with trembling hands that he lit the kerosene lamp.

The idea of waiting, day in and day out, for the time when the snow would allow him to leave, was becoming so maddening to Drew that he had to force the thought from his mind with desperate effort. He had never been alone before in his life, and the solemn stillness of the mountains brought him such pangs of loneliness such as he never knew existed. He had read of men going crazy in a spot like his. Desperately, he forced his thoughts to other things—back to New York, to the old life.

But that was worse, for those thoughts brought him visions—myriad images of the electric chair from a hundred different angles. And this time he could not force his thoughts to yet other things. Sing Sing, the electric chair, the little green door became predominant, wouldn't give way to anything else—even to the chair, the death house, the bodies of the man and woman he had killed.

MORE AND MORE desperately Joe Drew fought with his thoughts, fought to keep from going crazy. Like a man dying of thirst, he gulped down long draughts of moonshine. But that didn't help. No, it didn't—it only made the little green door became larger; yes, larger because it was now closer.

By nightfall Drew was opening a second bottle of whisky, but no longer did the liquor give him the false courage he sought. It only made fear live more and more strongly within him. That green door was now looming larger and larger. Then he realized that that green door had actually been with him ever since he had come to the cabin. Stupid—he hadn't noticed before that the inside of the cabin door, now darkened with age, had been painted green. He sighed with relief, turned back to the bottle and took a long swallow of the whisky.

But the green door held him fascinated; it seemed to gape at him with a hideous intentness. His mind began to reel, running his thoughts together in a nightmare jumble. He must leave, get down out of the mountains. But then, he had been spotted again, five years after the New York murder had blown over. Again every road was being watched. To go down from the mountains and return to civilization would mean—the little green door, the electric chair. But here, *here where he sat*, that green door loomed before him.

Then the long howl of a wolf sounded from close by, and soon came more and more wailing howls. Joe Drew shivered, clasped his hands over his knees and rocked himself back and forth on the edge of his bunk. The green door—Sing Sing—the chair. That was it, he wasn't in the cabin in the mountains. No—they'd caught him long ago, and taken him to Sing Sing, and he'd forgotten the long journey from the mountains to the prison. But he was there now, and the Sing Sing green door—not

the one in the cabin—was in front of him.

Again the wailing howls sounded from outside. Yes, that was it—the death house. Other men in the death house, also slated to go through that green door and die in the chair, were cracking under the strain; were wailing in soul-rending agony. Yes—men often did that in the death house. And that was where he was—in the death house. Only now he was out of his cell, facing that green door, waiting for the minister—for the last mile.

Joe Drew's jaws opened, quivering agonizedly, and a long-drawn wail from his throat blended with those from outside. He rocked forward too far on the bunk, crashed to the floor and struck his head against a leg of the table in the middle of the room. The wails from outside ceased at the same time as the wail from Drew's throat was cut off by his fall; were replaced by low growls and snarls.

In a few minutes Joe Drew came to his senses, sat up and shook his head; he stared dazedly about the cabin, then muttered: "Gotta get out of here, gotta get out before I go crazy." Quickly he dressed himself for outdoors and lit a lantern to take with him.

"They haven't got me, they haven't caught up with me. I'll fool 'em yet So—I'm a rat without the brains of a rat, eh?"

HE WENT to the floor-board under which he had hidden the loot, pried it up with a hunting knife. He jerked back as furry figures scurried away, plunging down under the wall with frantic, rustling scrapings. Rats, disturbed in a nest. Joe Drew stared at the nest from which the rats had fled. At first his stare was blank, stupid. Then, as comprehension worked in his mind, his eyes widened, glared with madness.

Seeking warmth for the winter, the rats had used the bank notes for a nest. Drew's glaring eyes saw a fortune ripped, chewed, shredded to pieces—destroyed—gone forever.

Joe Drew *was* a rat without the brains of a rat.

With a wild cry Drew rushed from the cabin, snowshoes-slapping weirdly, clumsily. He forgot the lantern, but a full moon shed an almost brilliant blue light that was magically reflected upon the pure-white surface of the snow. Struggling, floundering along, Drew skirted the edge of the ravine. He didn't know where he was going; he didn't care. All he wanted to do was go, keep going—forever.

Suddenly he pulled up short a few yards from an object that made a dark splotch upon the snow. Moonlight glinted on metal—a gun barrel, its muzzle pointed unswervingly at Joe Drew. Harry Roome still lay where he had fallen, the Winchester clutched in the viselike grip of dead hands—still guarding the trail along the edge of the ravine. In the moonlight Drew saw that Roome's clothing was ripped

and torn; that flesh was stripped away.

Eyes glinted greenly beside the corpse. A gaunt wolf tugged at the body, and a bright spurt of orange flame leapt from the muzzle of the rifle in the dead man's hands—and a crashing shot ripped through the heavy silence.

Joe Drew staggered forward, almost dropped flat on his face. Then with an effort, he pulled himself erect, bent backward weakly, knowing that the wolf's tugging had pulled the trigger of the rifle still clutched in Roome's hand. For a moment he stared up full into the face of the watching moon; then his eyes closed; then he fell on his back in the snow and lay still.

Receding into the distance, sounded a wailing howl—like that of a man in the death house at Sing Sing....