

One-Way Ticket to Nowhere

by Leroy Yerxa, 1915-1946

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Like a ghost in the night a whole Mono train vanished. And it was up to Jeff Blake to find out where it had gone...

Illustration:

Blake forced the hatch up with all his strenght

"JEFF BLAKE!" Holly O'Toole's knotted hand reached out and grasped the right hand of the passenger descending from the rocket transport. "This is a hell of a night to come home, when a man's been away as long as you have."

Jeff Blake laughed, and swung down to his side to stand on the wind- and rain-swept dock. He towered above O'Toole, lanky and smooth skinned. His face was tanned a deep brown from space travel and little wrinkles curled out from the corners of his mouth. Wrinkles that indicated a willing smile. There was a cheerful warmth of sincerity in his voice.

"Weather doesn't seem to bother me much any more. I've been in and out of a lot of it. This rain isn't much compared to those space turn-overs we've had around moon the last few weeks."

They walked together toward the lighted office. Once inside, Holly O'Toole tossed his coat across the warm elector-rad heater and turned admiring eyes on Jeff Blake's tall frame.

"They sure made a man of you in space service," he said. "The last time you left Hope you were a half-baked kid with a yen for a ray gun."

O'Toole sat back comfortably as Blake removed his jacket and threw it over the heater. Blake was hard, and yet as Holly watched him, there seemed to be a touch of softness in his eyes that hadn't been there when Blake was a kid. A little more of Wade Blake, maybe. When two men were born identical twins, they were bound together in a lot of odd little ways.

The faintest suggestion of a bitter smile started across Jeff Blake's young face. Then he relaxed, sat down. Lighting a cigarette he sucked deeply and let the smoke drift from his lips.

"The last time I saw you, O'Toole, you were a little red-headed Irishman who stirred up more trouble than my brother and I could get out of in a month. What is it now?"

Holly O'Toole's dark face grew concerned. At once Blake knew his trip would be interesting. Knew that the trouble he had been expecting was close at hand.

"It's your brother, Wade," O'Toole went on. "Wade's in hot water again, and he's in over his head."

That same sardonic smile flitted across Blake's face, and faded immediately. O'Toole was under a terrific strain. The man was only forty-five, yet the once brilliant battle flag of red hair had grown thin in spots. His eyes, once clear and snapping, were a washed-out blue.

"Go on," Blake said kindly. "When I got your message it wasn't easy to drop everything and come. I expected something like this."

O'Toole stared at him, hating to say what he knew he had to.

"Wade is planning to marry Dauna Ferrell."

"Dauna?" Blake was plainly puzzled. "Why, Dauna was a tow-headed brat when I left Earth. But if Wade wants her, why not?"

O'Toole shook his head a little impatiently.

"It isn't that he wants her," he said. "I can't explain everything now. Let's just say that Wade is giving up every chance he'll ever have of owning the 'Hope to Horn' line. He's stirring up trouble between Dauna and her father and making a dangerous ass of himself in the bargain."

BLAKE flicked the long ash from his cigarette.

"He must be a busy man," he admitted. "But where do I fit into this puzzle?"

Holly O'Toole was plainly bewildered.

"I wish I knew," he admitted. "I can't handle every angle alone, and if some changes don't come in a hurry, Wade, Dauna and Walter Ferrell will lose everything they have, including their sanity. You're the only man who can pound any brains into Wade's head. I figured you might be willing to try it, before it's too late."

He stood up rather stiffly, drew his belt up over his rounded paunch. Blake watched him with narrowed, speculative eyes. O'Toole looked at his watch.

"Where is Wade now?" Blake asked.

"At South Station since last night," O'Toole said.

"Does he know I'm on Earth?"

O'Toole looked doubtful.

"I'm afraid he does," he admitted. "I sent your radio-wave last week and he was in the office at the time. I can't explain why, but I have the feeling he checked up after I left and found out who I had radioed."

Blake followed O'Toole to the door, drew on his heavy coat.

"Let's get it over with," he shrugged his shoulders. "I've had to take Wade in hand a couple of times. Once more won't do any harm. We'll go to South Station."

O'Toole hesitated. He had something else to get off his chest.

"Jeff," he spoke gravely. "It's only fair to tell you that being Wade's twin may get you into some pretty heavy trouble."

Jeff grinned queerly.

"Good!" he said. "I sort of like the stuff."

The door slammed behind them and the light from the single window faded against the dark field.

A SWIFT shadow of a man darted from between the empty space docks. The stranger's arm went high and jerked straight. A wicked knife flicked from the steeled fingers. It missed Blake's neck by inches; struck the heavy door behind him. Blake took two swift steps forward, realized the man was already lost in the night. He stopped and pivoted. O'Toole had already jerked the knife from the door, was staring at it with tight lips.

"Playful bunch of goons you've got around here," Blake said mirthlessly.

"I'm afraid that's some of the trouble I mentioned," O'Toole replied. "I told you Wade is stirring up a pack of trouble and I'm afraid you're dropping right into the middle of it."

He held the knife out toward Blake and the younger man took it.

"My brother must have changed a lot since I saw him last. Ten years ago he spent most of his time playing the violin and raising flowers."

"Still does," O'Toole answered in a far-off voice. "But he has a few other hobbies now. Games that he's learned to play too well for his own good."

Blake was studying the knife that had missed his head. He ran a thumb lightly over the razor edge of the weapon.

"Games that you play with knives?"

O'Toole nodded.

"Unless I'm greatly mistaken," he answered grimly. "That nice little fellow who tossed the bread knife at you is one of Grudge Horror's play boys."

"Now," Blake said, "we're getting some place. Who is Grudge Horror and what's he got against Wade?"

"I'll try to tell you what I know of Horror while we're on our way to make that next mono-train," O'Toole said. He took another quick glance at his watch. "She pulls out in half an hour, so keep away from lights and let's get to the station before we miss her."

THEY went out of the fenced space-field, bending double against the storm. For several minutes O'Toole led Jeff Blake through deserted streets. Reaching the lighted dome that was the Hope Mono-Terminal, he explained.

"Grudge Horror," he said, "is the leader of a gang of cut-throats who have been holding up and wrecking trains from here to the border. He's got Walter Ferrell on the verge of bankruptcy. If something doesn't happen soon to stop him, the Hope to Horn⁽¹⁾ line will fold up like a busted space-kite."

"And Wade?" Blake questioned. "Where does he fit in the picture?"

"Ferrell depended on Wade to track Horror down and tear his gang apart. You mentioned that Wade liked to raise flowers. Well! Thus far, he's still at it. So for six months Horror has torn the business apart, train by train."

Blake looked through the great entrance into the warmly lighted Mono-Terminal. It was nearly deserted.

"It's a rotten shame that a cheap bunch of punks have spoiled a business as fine as Walter Ferrell's mono line," he said slowly. "It looks as though he has picked the wrong man for the job of getting Grudge Horror. Maybe we can do something about it."

Holly O'Toole whacked him heartily across the back.

"I knew you'd say that, Jeff." Something of the old fight was coming back into the Irishman's eyes. "I'll admit I'm stumped, but maybe with your help..."

THE mammoth dome of Hope's mono terminal was glowing warmly under a rainbow of fluorescent light, when Blake and O'Toole entered the rotunda. Crowds jostled toward the open gates that led to the V-Gaps that held the single-tracked mono train upright when they were at the station docks.

They followed down the long ramp to the dock and waited. A mono train scraped slowly around the V-Gap and stopped. On its blunt, plastic nose a single numeral was printed—6. The train was decorated in a sleek contrast of silver and brown. Inside, porters rushed about making the train ready for its return trip south.

Once on board, Blake stretched out and relaxed into deep air cushions.

"It's a good feeling to have some luxury again," he admitted. He lighted a cigarette from his crushed package and O'Toole accepted another. They watched quietly as a few despondent looking passengers filed in and sat down. A tense undercurrent of feeling was at once evident to Blake's keen eye. These travelers were here because of necessity. Not for their own pleasure.

He was totally unprepared for what happened in the next ten minutes. A girl came in. Before Blake could register surprise, she had uttered a little cry of joy, plunked her smart little body down at his side and thrown her arms around his neck.

"Oh! Darling! This is a surprise." He felt rich, warm lips press tightly to his own, brown eyes staring lovingly into his.

Suddenly the eyes widened in surprised horror and she stiffened. Her fingers went limp against his neck. Her lips tightened. She jumped up and sank limply into the chair opposite him.

"Oh!" She blushed profusely. "Oh! Heavens, I thought...."

Blake's face burned. Blood rushed to his cheeks and emotions he hadn't felt for years came rushing back into his body.

"I—I didn't expect..." he started.

The girl had collected her wits.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she said. "You look so much like someone I know..."

Blake looked her over quickly, and decided she was the most attractive, clean cut young thing he had ever seen. She was dressed in sleek brown traveling clothes. A pert, tight-fitting hat allowed the wealth of shining brown hair to escape its edges and flow down the straight, smoothly-molded shoulders. Her lips were still slightly curved in that attractive oval of dismay.

"Do you always kiss strange men who look like people you know," he asked, and immediately realized he was being cruel. "Forgive me, it *was* unexpected."

A look of recognition flooded her face.

"You must be Jeff Blake!" She stood up and clasped his hand warmly. "If it weren't for that coat of space tan, I'd have sworn you were Wade."

"Dauna Ferrell," he said with a gasp. "Golly, but you've grown up since I saw you last."

Her face turned a lovely pink.

"You won't have a very nice opinion of me after what I did?"

"Forget it." He leaned forward. "I've heard you're in love with Wade. If I was fortunate enough for only that one kiss, to take Wade's place with so beautiful a young lady, my life is one kiss richer than I deserve."

"I *do* love Wade," she said. "But if his brother insists on throwing such compliments at me, I'm sure he's going to be fine for my spirit. Thank you, sir."

HER eyes traveled suddenly beyond him, toward the car entrance. Blake turned and his face lighted at the sight of the tall, elderly man coming toward them. Walter Ferrell had aged since he last saw him, but the snow-white head, slim waist and wiry legs were the same. Ferrell came forward, a look of cold hostility in his eyes. Then he recognized the easy figure slouched in the chair opposite his daughter. A keen smile lighted his features.

"Jeff Blake!" His hand shot out. "My God, boy, you're good to look at."

Blake was on his feet, one hand in Ferrell's, the other on the older man's shoulder.

"And you!" he said. "The man who went to riches while I was kicking around as a space tramp in every port of the universe."

Dauna moved gracefully, swiftly to her father's side.

"Tell Dad how I greeted you," she blushed prettily. "Dad, I think Jeff had better go back to the moon. He and Wade will be quarreling over me if I go on acting the same way I started out today."

Ferrell paid no attention to Dauna's outburst. Yet, the mention of Wade's name sent smouldering fires into his eyes. He changed the subject abruptly. Drawing Blake down to the chair beside him he said.

"Tell me boy, what's happened since you left? I want to hear the whole story."

Blake talked. As he related the story of his past ten years away from earth, he watched O'Toole and Dauna, seated together a few seats away. They were

discussing Wade, he knew. Although he talked with Walter Ferrell, Blake's thoughts were with O'Toole, Wade and the girl, Dauna.

"Walter," he asked suddenly. "What's wrong with Wade? Has he been in trouble?"

Ferrell tipped a tired head back against the cushion of his chair.

"Nothing," he said slowly. "At least, nothing I can put my finger on."

"Then," Blake insisted, "from what O'Toole says, you've both been pretty tough on him. That is, if you're telling me the truth."

"Damn it, Blake," Ferrell exploded. "When I say nothing, I mean we haven't caught him violating any laws. It's—well, I just never had any admiration for Wade. He's what the younger generation would call a cream puff. Soft, flabby and a mind that refuses to grasp any problem fitted to a man of his age."

Blake stared out the window, waiting. The mono had pulled out of Hope. Outside nothing was visible in the night except an occasional jagged peak outlined against a cloudy sky. Troubled by Ferrell's continued silence, he turned again to his friend.

"YOU haven't told me much," he protested. "O'Toole called me home because he thought important things were going to take place. He thinks I ought to knock Wade around a little, but I've got to know why."

Ferrell swore softly.

"O'Toole is always sticking his neck out where it gets clipped every now and then. He's a swell Irishman, but his mountains are actually mole hills."

Blake nodded and said covertly, "Someone tried to heave a knife into me at the space-port. Was that one of O'Toole's mole hills?"

Ferrell's body jerked upright, and the muscles in his face stood out tautly.

"The hell you say!"

"Truth—ask O'Toole."

Blake's voice died. His eyes turned to slits. The coach door had opened quickly and a man had stepped inside. He was dressed from head to foot in skin-tight black leather. His eyes were covered with a flashing, silvery mask. Blake's gaze was on the small, ugly electro-gun in the bandit's hand.

"A visitor," Blake said laconically. At the same time he pushed his feet far back under the chair and braced them, like bent springs.

The masked man crouched at the waist and the gun whipped around, covering the few passengers in the car.

"Stand up—all of you." He spoke harshly and with deadly precision. "On your feet, and make it fast."

Blake waited. A low monotone of voices protested, died out to a whisper of fear, and the passengers, including Ferrell stood with arms raised.

The electro gun came around slowly toward Blake.

"Up on your corns," the bandit spat at him. His eyes were black, diamond slits in the silver mask.

Blake's gaze never wavered. Silver Mask came toward him slowly.

"You heard me."

A scorching flame seared Blake's cheek as the electro gun exploded and part of its force burned his skin. Blake's face whitened with rage and he dove desperately

forward. Smashing a hard fist into Silver Mask's face, he watched the fellow's body go limp. Two swift reflex actions, one savage and murderously threatening, the other desperately defensive, had brought lightning developments.

Blake heard Dauna scream in terror and turned like a flash. But the heavy butt of a new electro gun swept down on his head. There was a sudden sickening jolt and bright flashes of light went tearing into his brain. He pitched forward across the first bandit's limp body, and the car, spinning before his eyes, went blank.

WHEN Blake came around, he was stretched out full length on the floor, a pillow under his head. He looked up into Dauna's eyes.

"If you're wondering about the silver masked man who struck you," she said, "There are dozens of them on the train. They have us all under guard."

He sat up a little weakly, felt his head clear. Ferrell and O'Toole sat across from his make shift bed.

"They won't let me make a dash for the door, Jeff," O'Toole said in an unhappy voice. "Once in the hall, I could clean up on a snag of those black devils."

"And get your head bashed in, like Jeff did," Ferrell added. "You're sitting right here with me, *Mr.* O'Toole until we find out what this is all about."

Ferrell turned to Blake.

"You asked for trouble, Jeff," he said tersely. "You've got it. These are the same Silver Masks that have practically ruined my business. Looks as though this might do it. Wade was told to clean out this tribe of black devils six months ago. I detailed fifty men to work with him. I'll bet you a ten spot that at this moment Wade Blake is at South Station watering his flower bed, or some equally insane occupation."

Dauna was on her feet, arms akimbo, cheeks blazing.

"That's not fair, Dad," she flared. "He just isn't the type of boy to handle this problem. You saw what happened to Jeff..."

"Wait a minute," Blake begged. "O'Toole is all for knocking Wade's head against his garden wall. Ferrell, you want him to keep us out of trouble when he's eight thousand miles away, and Dauna is protecting him when I'm not altogether sure he deserves it. For the time being let's worry about what is to become of us. Later, there'll be time to fight over Wade."

Ferrell looked abashed.

"You're right," he admitted more quietly. "But you're a better man than I am if you can make sense out of this. Why don't they take what they want, kill us and be on their way?"

Blake looked out of the window. The sky was clear now. The rain had stopped and the moon and stars were visible.

"I think I can answer that," he said. "From my following the stars, we are now heading directly east, into the heart of the mountain country. If I'm correct on directions, the monoline runs directly north and south. Right?"

O'Toole pushed past him and strained his face to the glass. He turned, face shining.

"By golly," he said. "Jeff's right. We must be flying or something. There isn't any track that's laid in this direction!"

FERRELL stood at O'Toole's shoulder, looking out into the blackness. He turned toward them, face stark with terror.

"It—can't—be!" he spoke slowly. "Vancouver is south of us, and yet..."

"And yet you're going east." The strange voice cut in on them harshly.

Blake wheeled about to face the third Silver Mask he had seen tonight. The man towered above them, a full seven feet tall. His thick lips, visible below the mask, were curved in a cruel, delighted smile.

"You've bought one way tickets," he said gruffly. "Tickets that will take you—nowhere."

Continuing, he turned to Ferrell.

"Walter Ferrell, and his daughter, Dauna Ferrell. Am I right? We are fortunate in picking our company tonight."

"As owner of this rail line," Ferrell demanded in an even voice. "I want to know what this is all about. Where are we going?"

Outside the sounds of the wheels had faded. The train wasn't moving. It seemed to tip at a slight angle, as though leaning on some support.

"My name is Horror," Silver Mask said. "You're not going anywhere for the time being, and while you are here I'll thank you to call me *Mr.* Horror. Don't try to leave this car. My men are stationed all around the train with orders to shoot and look afterward. Take a look outside in a few minutes. You may be surprised."

He turned and stooped to go through the door.

Blake turned to Ferrell and O'Toole.

"I haven't got the drift of all this yet," he admitted. "But we're in for trouble and plenty of it."

BLAKE was sitting quietly in the smoker, head reclining on the window ledge, eyes half closed in a cloud of smoke. The girl and her father were asleep. O'Toole pretended to be, but Blake wasn't sure of the Irishman. O'Toole slept with one eye open most of the time.

The deep silence and blackness outside of the window could indicate only one thing. They were in some sort of a cave. The giant Horror had said if they looked out, they might be surprised. Yet, hours had passed, and the place was quiet and black as a tomb.

The door opened and a newspaper flopped on the floor. Blake went forward and picked it up.

"Thought you'd like to see the big news." It was Horror's heavy voice rumbling from the doorway. "Flown in from South Station. We've been waiting to see what reaction the kidnaping of a train might have."

Blake listened quietly, and without a word turned on his heel and returned to his chair. The door closed on them again.

Blake glanced at the headline. Then the full significance of Silver Mask's latest move hit him between the eyes. The headline of the South Station Star was in letters six inches high:

MONO FLYER MISSING
Entire Train Lost Without Trace

Mono 6, crack flyer of the "Hope to Horn" mono line* disappeared from the face of the earth tonight. On board were Walter Ferrell, the company's owner, and Dauna, his daughter. At an emergency meeting of the board of directors, it was admitted that not the slightest clue to the train's whereabouts has been discovered.

Soon after midnight, Mono 6 of the west coast's crack Mono Line left Hope, Alaska. No further reports came after it passed the first five-hundred-mile zone. Reports of a wreck are unconfirmed. A complete search of the track failed to bring to light the slightest hint of the flyer's final resting place.

In the past few hours the company has faced the problem of handling thousands of tour cancellations. Officials of the line are attempting vainly to allay the fears of both would-be passengers and stockholders. Wade Blake, Vice President of the company had previously ordered an investigation in an attempt to track to earth the series of strange accidents that have followed the Hope to Horn mono line for some months, but cannot be located at present for a statement.

BLAKE threw the paper on the floor. There was more to the story. Much more. Here in a few columns he had read the final exit of a great railroad line and its owner. Unless Walter Ferrell and Mono 6 could arrive at South Station, unharmed and within a few hours, the world would refuse to accept further service from the Hope to Horn and Ferrell's business would be ruined.

The article said that Wade could not be located. Blake hoped that he had been close when the train failed to arrive at Vancouver. A momentary frown turned down the corners of his lips. Perhaps Wade wasn't as helpless as they seemed to think. Blake fervently hoped so.

SINCE Blake had finished reading the paper, two hours had passed, as nearly as he could guess. O'Toole came in from the car's smoking compartment, and sat down wearily across from Blake. He pushed his big feet up on the chair beside Blake.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Blake pointed to the paper silently and O'Toole picked it up. He read quickly, his eyes darting from side to side of the page. His face grew purple.

"They certainly pulled a fast one," he growled. "A whole train missing, with the owner of the line and his daughter on it. I never stopped to think what that might mean when the papers got hold of it."

"Nor I," Blake admitted. "But Horror did, and if I'm not mistaken, someone with a lot more brains than Horror had the same idea. This thing was carefully planned, O'Toole, but there are two points that the Silver Masks overlooked."

O'Toole looked at him questioningly.

"One was they didn't expect you and me to cause the trouble we're going to," Blake went on, "and the other is Wade. He's around somewhere. He may help us out at the right time."

O'Toole spat disgustedly.

"We can cause trouble if we ever get out of here," he admitted. "I'm not so sure of Wade."

A shaft of light cut in through the window suddenly, blinding them both.

They stared out with wide eyes. A murmur of voices from the car told them that the others were awake, and also impressed by what they saw.

Mono 6 was in a great cavern. Great black granite walls towered high above. The mono train had evidently entered the cave slowly and slipped between a long row of huge boulders that held it upright. The cave was a graveyard of mono cars. They lay across the full width of its floor, dismantled and torn apart for whatever value they had to offer.

For the first time Blake realized just how large operations had been; just how close the Silver Masks were to ruining the industry Ferrell had painstakingly built up.

Men appeared from a long row of doors worked into the cliff side. They all looked alike in the black suits and glittering silver masks. Tools of every description had made their appearance. Beyond the doors from whence they had come must be a complete set of living quarters with access to the outside world.

Common sense told Blake that the entrance through which Mono 6 had arrived was now carefully sealed. If he was to solve the mystery of Grudge Horror's plans and make escape possible, it would be necessary to go through those doors. Horror himself was there somewhere, and Blake's fists ached to meet the man alone.

"MY golly," O'Toole breathed. "They all look alike. What you suppose they'll do with us? Must be forty or fifty people on this set of cars." Blake turned away from the window.

"If the train were wrecked," he said in a matter of fact voice, "they'd take everything off it and leave it here. With passengers on board, they have to remove the baggage and movable parts. After that..."

"After that, we'll all go to hell the fastest way," O'Toole said with grim lips. "Let's get something started. I can't sit still until they decide what to do with us."

"If I'm not mistaken," Blake said grimly, "they have us all disposed of well in advance. You mentioned just one thing that may help us out."

"If I did," O'Toole admitted, "It was just crazy luck."

"They all look alike." Blake stood up, studied O'Toole carefully, and said. "We're going to join the gang of the Silver Masks."

O'Toole grinned.

"Just like that," he said dryly. "And this guy Horror is going to shake our hands and say, 'Glad to see you're with us, boys.'"

Blake was already out of the smoking lounge. He went toward the end of the car with a swift, determined stride. Ferrell and Dauna had been at the window and as he approached the door leading outside, they turned.

"Hold it, Jeff," Ferrell said. "You're going to do something foolish and I won't have it."

"We've already got ourselves into a pretty foolish mess," Blake reminded him almost bitterly. "If I can do any good by trying, I don't want you to interfere. It may be too late."

Dauna barred his way to the door. Her face was drawn and bloodless.

"You're going to face that giant, Horror," she pleaded haltingly. "Jeff, please...?"

He took her hands in his, and smiled down at her.

"Wade wouldn't want you to put on a scene," he said gently. "I'm in this thing up to my neck. Wade's name and my own are both involved."

She hesitated and stepped away from him. Her arms dropped hopelessly.

O'Toole reached the door with Blake.

"What are the plans," he asked? "I'm in on them remember."

"Then start howling at the top of your lungs," Blake grinned. "Call Horror every name you ever heard of, but remember there are women in the car. We're going to get dragged out of here and have a talk with that freak."

O'Toole nodded.

"Okay!" he said. "I get the idea. If we can be bad boys, maybe Horror will spank us himself."

"He'll try," Blake answered quietly. "From then on it will depend on us who does the punishing."

BLAKE turned to the door and ignoring Dauna, started to pound on it with all his strength, O'Toole added his weight to Blake's and they started to shout loudly.

"We want to sock that big goon, Horror," O'Toole howled. He turned and winked at Dauna. "How'm I doing?" he asked.

Dauna smiled gamely.

"So well, you'll probably be shot at once," she said. "Please Blake, be careful."

They pounded again, harder than ever. The door started to sway and buckle under their weight. There was a heavy step outside, and a murmur of angry voices.

"Shut up in there."

"We want to talk with your boss," Blake shouted. "Let us out or we'll clean up on the whole gang of you."

The door swung open, and a guard came in. Two more were close behind. Guns swung around, covering the car.

"You'll talk with Horror," the first man said. "And you'll be damned sorry you did."

He pushed a gun into Blake's side.

"Now walk," he ordered. "And walk straight. No monkey business."

O'Toole started to follow them.

"You're staying here," the guard growled. "This monkey is going to get the business."

O'Toole reddened with rage.

"Why you masked ape," he said. "Let me out of here or I'll push your chin into your scalp."

That did the trick. The second guard twisted around and punched O'Toole in the face. The Irishman reeled, caught himself and said through bloody lips, "You'll pay for that."

The masked man pushed him from the car and O'Toole went a little uncertainly down the steps and after Blake.

They crossed the floor of the cave toward the series of doors in the wall. Two more guards joined the group and they paused before the first door.

"We got some wise guys," the man who was covering Blake shouted. "Want to give them a going over, Chief?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Grudge Horror's heavy voice said from beyond the door.

"Bring them in."

Blake kicked the door open and strode into a small, mercury-lighted room. There was a single chair and the desk behind which Horror was seated. His huge arms rested across its top. His expression darkened as he saw Blake.

"What's he been up to?"

The guard stepped close to Horror and pocketed his weapon.

"He was shouting his head off," he said. Then, in an almost apologetic voice he added, "The Irishman insisted on coming along."

BLAKE'S eyes were on Horror's face. The giant's fists were clenched, his lips tight and cruel. He was searching for something.

"All right," Horror growled finally. "What's the game?"

"Nothing," Blake answered shrewdly. "We were waiting for you to murder us, and got impatient, that's all."

Two of the guards left and Horror swung to his feet. He was leering.

Blake watched the remaining guards from the corner of his eye. O'Toole was still standing quietly by the door, alert and ready. He saw Blake's eye on his, and winked deliberately. O'Toole, Blake decided, was ready any time.

"You were right on the murder angle," Horror admitted. "Pretty smart, ain't you?"

"About some things," Blake admitted. "I don't fall for everything I read in the papers. I know you used a hidden mono track to get us here, and that you'll probably send us back over it into a nice deep canyon, when you have everything you want off the train."

Horror leaned over silently and spat into his face. Blake saw red. With a lightning thrust he smashed the lamp from the table and plunged the room into blackness. From O'Toole's side of the room a ray gun belched fire, but Blake was already out of range. He heard a cry of pain and realized that Horror had caught the flame on the arm. Horror, outlined in the light of the ray was almost on top of him.

From the spot where O'Toole had been, Blake heard a sullen thud and a long groan of pain. Dodging from Horror's plunging fall, Blake knew O'Toole was doing his part. He grasped the edge of the table and tried to thrust it in front of Horror. The man swore loudly and kicked it away. There was a slit of light coming from under the door.

In its path, Blake saw Horror standing above him, a hairy fist descending like a ton of lead. He twisted his face around, sensed Horror's blow miss him by a fraction of an inch. Diving low he hit Horror a body blow with his shoulder and the giant doubled in pain. Blake swung upward before Horror could regain his balance, and set his fist crashing into Horror's face. The giant swung backward like an enraged elephant. Two more flashes of electro-fire went spurting over his head and O'Toole started to sing in a loud, off-key voice.

"Slug 'em," O'Toole chanted. "It's the Irish that are in this mess tonight."

In the darkness, Blake grinned painfully. His lip was split and bleeding. His arm ached from the forceful contact with Horror's jaw.

Another guard went down in the scuffle and O'Toole howled his battle cry again.

HARROR was silent. Blake changed his position wearily, waiting for some sign. He heard Horror breathing loudly from the far corner. The blow on the face must have dazed him.

Blake closed it slowly, listening to Horror. Waiting for him to strike again. Then two giant arms closed tightly around his chest, cutting off his breath. He tried to shout, but his lips made no sound. He felt himself sinking toward the floor, Horror on top of him. Horror was holding on with all his strength.

Blake relaxed slowly, and his head fell to one side. He felt the grip relax just a trifle, and gathered all his remaining strength. With a terrific uppercut, Blake's arm shot upward, catching Horror squarely on the chin. There was a sudden snap as the giant's head tipped back as though unhinged. His arms relaxed and Blake fell away from him.

The Irishman had done his job well. The room was quiet.

Then: "Jeff, Jeff, are you all right."

Blake chuckled.

"I've got condensed ribs," he said. "But I think Horror will lie still for a while."

"Golly!" O'Toole sighed in relief. "You sure had a Goliath on your hands. Wish I could have helped you."

"What became of those two guards," Jeff asked? "Seems to me they had you on the spot for a while."

"Aw!" O'Toole said. "I got hold of one of them fire guns and there wasn't anything to it."

Blake had reached the door to the outer cavern. He opened it a couple of inches and looked out. The Silver Mask gang were still working on Mono 6.

Even as he watched, a man detached himself from the gang at the far end of the train and came slowly toward the partially opened door. Blake jumped back and closed it tightly.

"Get two of these guards out of their uniforms," he said. "Make it quick. We've got more trouble coming."

A QUICK knock came on the door. Blake said, in a hard voice.

"Yeah! Who is it?"

"Slater," was the reply. "Tell the boss we got the train cleaned out. We're all ready to set it loose."

In the light of the open door, Blake looked at O'Toole. The Irishman was already in one of the Silver Mask uniforms. His face was hidden and he looked like one of the gang.

"Tell him the boss will be all set in a minute," Blake said. "I've got to get into one of these outfits."

O'Toole flung the door open wider and pushed the bodies of the silent guards out of sight.

"We'll be out in a minute," he said to Slater. "Get her ready to roll."

"Yes sir," Slater answered him respectfully. "The cab is all fixed, and the motors are turning. The hidden door has been opened so we better make it snappy."

O'Toole nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Make sure you don't leave anything on board that's useful. And Slater..."

The man had turned. Now he hesitated and turned back.

"Yeah?"

"Horror is staying here," O'Toole said quickly. "He ain't feeling so good. Says I'm to give the orders."

Slater laughed.

"That's a good one," he chuckled. "How long since that gorilla started giving orders around here."

Still laughing, he turned and went back toward the waiting masked men.

O'Toole closed the door and ripped the mask away.

"This is it," he said quickly. "I knew Wade was mixed up in this business. Horror isn't the real boss here."

Blake was half way into a uniform of the Silver Masks. He finished his job before answering. Then he spoke.

"I know you and Ferrell hate Wade's guts," he said slowly, "but..."

"It's not me so much," O'Toole protested. "Ferrell said long ago that Wade was in this mess. He didn't seem to get any action on the case. Now with the guy Slater saying Horror isn't the boss, there isn't any other answer."

"SORRY, O'Toole," Blake said. "I should be willing to admit that Wade's our man. I don't know why I can't. It's just that blood is pretty thick stuff, I guess. It's hard to think your own brother would turn on you like this."

O'Toole lowered his head.

"We've got to do something," he said quietly. "Those guys won't sit out there waiting forever."

Blake stood up slowly.

"Supposing Wade isn't the chief," he asked. "What then?"

"They'll kill us all, just as they already plan to," O'Toole groaned. "We might as well take a flying chance."

Blake shook his head.

"I've got a better idea," he said.

"Then spill it. We haven't much time."

"To begin with," Blake said. "If Wade was in this he'd have shown up here long ago. The paper said he couldn't be located. I'd recognize my twin even in one of these outfits."

O'Toole protested.

"Then who is the chief? He's here somewhere and Slater sure didn't intend to take orders from Horror."

"He must be on the train," Blake answered.

"Now you're crazy," O'Toole answered savagely. "The people on Mono 6 have been locked up for hours. If the leader of the Silver Masks was among them he'd have taken charge hours ago."

"Unless," Blake said thoughtfully, "he didn't want any of us to *know* he was the leader."

O'Toole pulled the mask down over his eyes.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "You've got something up your sleeve and I'll play the cards the way you want them."

"One more thing," Blake told him. "These men had to have a track to get Mono 6 into this cave. When it goes out again we'll be on the same track, but it will end in a canyon or deep lake."

"Go on."

"Well! We've got to get started on that trip. After we are out you and I will have to take our chances of stopping the mono."

"And I thought Grudge Horror was a tough baby," O'Toole grinned.

"IT isn't a matter of being tough," Blake said. "Can you handle the engine room alone?"

"Handled it for years," O'Toole said coolly. "But I'd like to know where that track ends."

"You will." Blake went toward the door. He gripped O'Toole's shoulder. "You're a good Irishman, O'Toole. Now go out of here and straight to the cab. I don't think they'll dare send one of the other men. If the controls are tied into place, leave them alone. When I signal, set all motors going full speed. Sit tight and keep her flying."

"And the end of the track?" O'Toole asked. "If I don't get shot in the back before I'm half way across the cave, how do I know when to stop?"

Blake chuckled dryly.

"Perhaps you won't," he admitted. "But I'll be in the rear lounge with every male passenger within my sight. One of them is bound to break down when he knows he's at the end of the trail."

"So?"

"I'll jerk the emergency cord," Blake said. "Set your brakes the minute you hear it. O'Toole, it's a long chance but we've got to take it."

"One more thing," O'Toole asked. "Blake, who in hell is the leader of the Silver Masks?"

Blake hesitated, his face darkening. He opened the door and pushed O'Toole out gently.

"If I'm not mistaken," he whispered evenly, "Walter Ferrell knows more about this than he's telling."

THE gang of Silver Masks were gathered around the front end of Mono 6 as Holly O'Toole and Jeff Blake emerged from Horror's office. They walked swiftly toward the cab, and Slater who had evidently been waiting, stepped from the crowd and came toward them.

"How about it?" He addressed Holly O'Toole, as O'Toole seemed to be leading Blake. "Everything has been stripped from the baggage cars. She's ready for her trip into the lake."

"Okay!" O'Toole mumbled. He turned to Blake. "Take two men and get all the passengers into the lounge car."

Blake's heart was pounding wildly. If O'Toole slipped now, they'd all pay for it. He turned toward the crowd of waiting masked men.

"Two of you guys step out," he ordered. "Open the doors and herd those cattle into the last car back."

They obeyed him instantly. In five minutes every man and woman in the flyer were crowded into the car with Walter Ferrell and Dauna. O'Toole hesitated, started to climb into the cab of Mono 6, and Slater stopped him.

Standing a few feet away, Blake heard them mumble something. O'Toole pointed to Blake.

"I'll see that she gets clear of the cave," he said in a loud voice. "The boss wants him to be in the car until it's started and on the way down."

Slater hesitated, nodded and turned away. O'Toole winked and Blake grinned back at him. The Irishman had done a swell job. This was one night when his blarney had been a blessing.

When Jeff Blake went into the lounge car, he drew his electro gun. The car was full of frightened women and angry men. He was afraid they might turn on him in the Silver Mask, and spoil his plans. Slater had followed him to the door.

"Don't stick too long," the man cautioned him. "You'll be doing a hundred miles an hour before you hit the head end of the valley. The boss is going to jump when he leaves the cave."

The boss? Then O'Toole really had done a good job. Automatically Blake looked toward Walter Ferrell, and noticed that he was of the same build and size as O'Toole. Slater couldn't see the occupants of the car, but he guessed who Blake was staring at.

"Take good care of Ferrell," Slater said in a dry whisper. "He's worth a lot of money to us."

Blake grinned.

"*Don't worry,*" he said. "*I'll take good care of him.*"

MONO 6 started to glide smoothly back out of the cave. Somewhere out of sight behind the flyer, a huge door opened in the side of the mountain and screeched its way into the concealed slit above. The train gathered speed swiftly, and the moon suddenly appeared from nowhere. Blake waited, made sure there were no guards remaining on board. Then he ran swiftly toward the group around Ferrell. He ripped the mask off as he moved, and Dauna, her eyes glued to his face, gasped in happy surprise.

"Jeff," she ran toward him, "Oh! Jeff, I'm so glad."

He pressed his lips to hers quickly, turned away without a word and faced Walter Ferrell. Ferrell's face was expressionless, frightened.

"*Jeff Blake,*" he said. "How did you make it?"

"There isn't time to talk now," Blake answered quickly. "O'Toole and I overcame Horror. We managed to get them to start Mono 6 out of the cave. O'Toole is in the cab now. In a few minutes we'll be free. Before they wake up to the trick we played on them we'll be five hundred miles away."

Ferrell's face relaxed. Although Blake watched him closely, the man showed no sign of alarm.

"Good work, boy." His hand gripped Blake's shoulder. "I don't know how you did it, but there'll be a big reward for you when we reach South Station."

Blake sat down opposite him. His eyes never left Ferrell's face. Yet, Ferrell held himself remarkably in reserve.

"I did it more for Dauna than anyone else," Blake admitted slowly. "We wouldn't have anything happen to her would we?"

Ferrell turned toward his daughter.

"I've been pretty hard on my girl," he said. "But if she hadn't got out safely I'd have torn that place apart with my bare hands."

He meant every word of it. Blake's body tensed. The full shock of what Ferrell's words meant was sinking slowly into his brain. Suddenly he shot to his feet.

"I've been a fool," he said. "A damned, blind fool!"

"A fool?" There was no mistaking Walter Ferrell's bewilderment.

Blake was already at the car door.

"I'm going to take a long chance," he shouted back. "Ferrell, you crowd the passengers into both halls at the ends of the car. Open the outer doors. If the train goes into the lake, try to get as many out as you can."

WITH the shouts of alarm still ringing in his ears, Blake went swiftly through the long empty cars toward the cab. The train was backing through the night now at a terrific speed, and the black forest flashed past him as he went to his appointment with Holly O'Toole.

Blake reached the head car, tried the door and stepped back in alarm. It was locked. He looked overhead and found the tiny emergency entrance to the catwalk above. Back inside, he dragged several chairs out quickly, climbed them and pushed upward. Luckily the door was open. Head and shoulders above the train, he stopped. The wind pushed him back, clutching at his breath. He climbed out on the catwalk slowly, crouching to the smoothness of the plastic, and wriggled ahead.

The diesel room was below him now. Its top door opened easy. He listened. All motors were purring smoothly. The hot smell of oil drifted up. Ahead, the cab was silent.

He pushed his feet down cautiously and dropped. His feet hit the oily floor and he fell flat. The door to the cab was open. He went toward it, saw lights over the dash and ran to the main control stick. It was lashed firmly in place with heavy chain.

The speed indicator was pointing to four hundred miles per hour. Swiftly he released the chain, and felt the control lever break loose, falling into neutral. Blake reached for the magnetic brake, and heard a footstep on the floor behind. He whirled swiftly. O'Toole was standing at the entrance of the diesel room, electro gun pointing at Blake's chest.

"You're a smart one," O'Toole said. He waved the gun meaningly. "I'm glad you cut the power. We'll coast from here to the lake."

Blake was silent.

"Thought Walter Ferrell was the chief of this outfit, did you?" O'Toole was enjoying himself. "Well, I didn't have any idea of jumping the train. We'll coast within a mile of the cut, shoot the coupling free between the cab and the coaches,

and set our brakes. Walter Ferrell and his little party are going to taste cold water for the last time."

Blake said nothing. He started to walk deliberately toward the hulking Irishman. O'Toole snarled.

"Back," he warned. "I've got to kill you anyhow. It might as well be now." Blake grinned.

"I can't understand why you ever included me in this set-up to begin with," he said. "Things would have been easier if you hadn't sent for me."

"Listen Blake, when I sent for you, I figured you'd fit in here. I didn't know you'd fall for all this kid brother heroic stuff."

"YOU evidently knew something of my history," Blake said coolly. "Why did you play that sympathetic game?"

O'Toole seemed anxious to be understood.

"I knew you had been pirating every space craft between here and Mars," he said. "I knew that you had a swell reputation and were clever as hell. I knew that if you'd see things my way, I could get Walter Ferrell in bankruptcy within a month, and cut you in as a partner."

"Why change your mind?" Blake asked. He sat down in the pilot's chair and crossed his legs comfortably. "All we have to do is cut that coupling loose, ride back to the cave and collect all the dough we need by sitting tight."

O'Toole chuckled.

"Do you take me for a fool? I can handle things my own way, with Ferrell out of the way. I don't need you." His face softened a bit, and the gun dropped inches. "Besides, how do I know you won't turn yellow and give the whole thing away?"

Blake saw his chance to hit at O'Toole's one weakness.

"Wade is out of the way," he said swiftly. "I can return to South Station and assume control of the line with Ferrell out of the picture. You'll get half of everything we make."

O'Toole was weakening. He glanced out of the cab, toward the wooded side of the valley.

"You're just crooked enough to be on the level," he pocketed the electro gun. "In ten minutes we'll reach Loon Lake. Better get to that coupling."

Blake followed him back through the power car.

O'Toole turned once, and grinned wickedly.

"We'll have a devil of a time, you and I," he said. "Now, for a nice swimming party to Ferrell and his gang."

He hunched down over the coupling that separated the power units from the line of coaches. The simple coupling adjustment was under his doubled fist. Blake's eyes narrowed as the coupling started to come loose under the Irishman's grip. He lifted his heavy boot, and silently brought it down on O'Toole's head.

The blow was executed coolly and without feeling. No quarter had been asked, and there was no pity in Blake's eyes as Holly O'Toole fell forward, face down. He lay still, arms outstretched over the slit between the cars. Blake pushed him forward, and saw the body drop quickly out of sight to the rail.

HE turned toward the cab and with feverish haste jerked down all three magnetic brake levers. Mono 6 shuddered through its entire length and seemed to settle backward against the screaming, protesting track. The flyer halted slowly, skidding sickeningly. Then outside, with the shrieking brakes silenced, Jeff could hear the soft lapping of water.

He rushed to the open window and looked down. They were on a long wharf, extending out over dark water. He looked back along the line of cars, shining faintly in the moonlight. A sigh of relief escaped his lips. Mono 6 was still on the rail. A scant three hundred feet beyond the last car was open water.

A shout of alarm came from somewhere back in the corridor of the car. Blake turned away from the window and went toward the coaches. At the door to the power room he stopped. Dauna Ferrell, her face flushed with relief came to him. He took her in his arms and held her close. He kissed her roughly, trying to make up for the loneliness and heartbreak he had caused.

Walter Ferrell was behind them.

"I hate to intrude," his face was bathed in a happy smile, "but wherever Wade is, I'm sure he wouldn't approve of his brother making love to my daughter, even if Jeff is somewhat of a hero right now."

Dauna released her hold on Blake's neck, and turned to her father. Blake's arms went around her waist and drew her close to him. She leaned her soft, curly head against his neck.

"Dad," she said, "brace yourself for an awful shock."

Ferrell laughed aloud.

"I know," he said. "You've given up Wade and are going to marry Jeff Blake instead."

Dauna half turned, and nuzzled her chin in Blake's brown neck.

"No," she said. "I'm going to marry Wade anyhow."

Ferrell was bewildered.

"But I don't see..." he stuttered.

"It's going to be confusing," Dauna told him. "But, try to understand. Jeff Blake, the real Jeff I mean, was killed a month ago, while holding up a space ship near Mars."

Ferrell acted for a moment as though he were going to faint. Then he got control over himself. He stared at Blake with unbelieving eyes.

"Then—you're—Wade...!"

Blake nodded.

"I couldn't seem to get a line on this Silver Mask gang," he admitted hesitantly. "When O'Toole wired Jeff to return I couldn't figure out why. O'Toole and I have both known that Jeff was a tramp and a space pirate. I knew one thing that O'Toole didn't. The space authorities informed me a month ago that Jeff was dead. I was suspicious of O'Toole from the first. I caught a local rocket and boarded the moon liner in space. With some artificial tan, a space uniform and a lot of bluff I managed to play the part. It fooled everyone but Dauna. She knew almost from the first, but she kept my secret."

Walter Ferrell backed into the lounge car. He sat down abruptly.

"I know you've done something I never thought possible," he admitted. "And to prove my gratitude I'll apologize for everything I've ever said against Wade Blake. From now on you're half owner of the *Hope to Horn*."

Wade Blake grinned broadly.

"Thank you sir," he said. "But I can't accept your offer. If Dauna marries me she's destined to get star dust in her eyes."

Dauna looked at him worshipingly.

"In fact she already has flakes of it there now," Wade added. "Space officials have asked me to track down the gang who worked with my brother Jeff. If Dauna will say the word, I'd like to spend our honeymoon on Luna, and then get started on the new job."

Ferrell sighed deeply.

"I think Dauna has given her answer already," he said softly. "As for me, I'll have to make a public statement, taking back every word about Wade Blake and his love for flowers and the violin."

"That man Horror said we had a one way ticket to nowhere," Dauna said dreamily. "I wonder if we'll ever get there?"

"If we do," Wade told her, "I'm sure with you there, it's going to be a wonderful place."



⁽¹⁾ "Hope to Horn" was the nickname lovingly applied by its loyal employees to the mono railroad developed and owned by Walter Ferrell. These mono, or single-tracked trains were brought into service in 2100. The Hope to Horn line itself consisted of a north- and south-bound rail of heavy plastic extending from Hope, Alaska to Cape Horn, South America.

They were powered by standard sixteen engine diesels, capable of five hundred miles per hour. Built almost in the shape of long graceful fish, the trains were of highly colored plastic. They ran on a single rail of plastic-steel.

In a few short hours men and women tired of business could follow the entire Pacific coast line from one end to the other, the entire trip consuming twenty-two running hours between Hope and Cape Horn.

The plastic rail kept upkeep at a minimum and allowed the use of a simplified signal system in place of earlier complicated switches and signal signs. The track was divided into five-hundred-mile sections. Every two hours a train left one of these sections, or "blocks." In leaving, they allowed the plastic to turn green or "open," signaling the next train to depart. As long as the pilot could see green track ahead and red behind, he was safe to travel "on time."

Gyroscopic balancers, huge head and tail fins, and constantly maintained speeds allowed a mono to travel safely on a single row of centered wheels.