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THE POSTMAN

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I

THE CASCADES

In dust and blood—with the sharp tang of terror stark in his nostrils—a man's mind will sometimes pull forth odd relevancies. After half a lifetime in the wilderness, most of it spent struggling to survive, it still struck Gordon as odd—how obscure memories would pop into his mind right in the middle of a life-or-death fight.

Panting under a bone-dry thicket—crawling desperately to find a refuge—he suddenly experienced a recollection as clear as the dusty stones under his nose. It was a memory of contrast—of a rainy afternoon in a warm, safe university library, long ago—of a lost world filled with books and music and carefree philosophical ramblings.

Words on a page.

Dragging his body through the tough, unyielding bracken, he could almost *see* the letters, black against white. And although he couldn't recall the obscure author's name, the *words* came back with utter clarity.

“Short of Death itself, there is no such thing as a ‘total’ defeat. . . . There is never a disaster so devastating that a determined person cannot pull something out of the ashes—by risking all that he or she has left. . . .”

“Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a desperate man.”

Gordon wished the long-dead writer were here right now, sharing his predicament. He wondered what pollyan-

nish glow the fellow might find around *this* catastrophe. Scratched and torn from his desperate escape into this dense thicket, he crawled as quietly as he could, stopping to lay still and squeeze his eyes shut whenever the floating dust seemed about to make him sneeze. It was slow, painful progress, and he wasn't even sure where he was headed.

Minutes ago he had been as comfortable and well-stocked as any solitary traveler could hope to be, these days. Now, Gordon was reduced to not much more than a ripped shirt, faded jeans, and camp moccasins—and the thorns were cutting them all to bits.

A tapestry of fiery pain followed each new scratch down his arms and back. But in this awful, bone-dry jungle, there was nothing to do but crawl onward and pray his twisting path did not deliver him back to his enemies—to those who had effectively killed him already.

Finally, when he had come to think the hellish growth would never end, an opening appeared ahead. A narrow cleft split the brush and overlooked a slope of tumbled rock. Gordon pulled free of the thorns at last, rolled over onto his back, and stared up at the hazy sky, grateful simply for air that wasn't foul with the heat of dry decay.

Welcome to Oregon, he thought bitterly. *And I thought Idaho was bad.*

He lifted one arm and tried to wipe the dust out of his eyes.

Or is it that I'm simply getting too old for this sort of thing? After all, he was over thirty now, beyond the typical life expectancy of a postholocaust traveler.

Oh Lord, I wish I was home again.

He wasn't thinking of Minneapolis. The prairie today was a hell he had struggled for more than a decade to escape. No, *home* meant more to Gordon than any particular place.

A hamburger, a hot bath, music, Merthiolate . . .

. . . a cool beer . . .

As his labored breathing settled, other sounds came to the fore—the all too clear noise of happy looting. It rose

from a hundred feet or so down the mountainside. *Laughter as the delighted robbers tore through Gordon's gear.*

. . . a few friendly neighborhood cops . . . Gordon added, still cataloging the amenities of a world long gone.

The bandits had caught him off guard as he sipped elderberry tea by a late afternoon campfire. From that first instant, as they charged up the trail straight at him, it had been clear that the hot-faced men would as soon kill Gordon as look at him.

He hadn't waited for them to decide which to do. Throwing scalding tea into the face of the first bearded robber, he dove right into the nearby brambles. Two gunshots had followed him, and that was all. Probably, his carcass wasn't worth as much to the thieves as an irreplaceable bullet. They already had all his goods, anyway.

Or so they probably think.

Gordon's smile was bitterly thin as he sat up carefully, backing along his rocky perch until he felt sure he was out of view of the slope below. He plucked his travel belt free of twigs and drew the half-full canteen for a long, desperately needed drink.

Bless you, paranoia, he thought. Not once since the Doomwar had he ever allowed the belt more than three feet from his side. It was the only thing he had been able to grab before diving into the brambles.

The dark gray metal of his .38 revolver shone even under a fine layer of dust, as he drew it from its holster. Gordon blew on the snub-nosed weapon and carefully checked its action. Soft clicking testified in understated eloquence to the craftsmanship and deadly precision of another age. Even in killing, the old world had made well.

Especially in the art of killing, Gordon reminded himself. *Raucous laughter* carried up from the slope below.

Normally he traveled with only four rounds loaded. Now he pulled two more precious cartridges from a belt pouch and filled the empty chambers under and behind the hammer. "Firearm safety" was no longer a major consideration, especially since he expected to die this evening anyway.

Sixteen years chasing a dream, Gordon thought. First that long, futile struggle against the collapse . . . then scratching to survive through the Three-Year Winter . . . and finally, more than a decade of moving from place to place, dodging pestilence and hunger, fighting goddamned Holnists and packs of wild dogs . . . half a lifetime spent as a wandering, dark age minstrel, play-acting for meals in order to make it one day more while I searched for . . .

. . . for someplace . . .

Gordon shook his head. He knew his own dreams quite well. They were a fool's fantasies, and had no place in the present world.

. . . for someplace where someone was taking responsibility . . .

He pushed the thought aside. Whatever he had been looking for, his long seeking seemed to have ended here, in the dry, cold mountains of what had once been eastern Oregon.

From the sounds below he could tell that the bandits were packing up, getting ready to move off with their plunder. Thick patches of desiccated creeper blocked Gordon's view downslope through the ponderosa pines, but soon a burly man in a faded plaid hunting coat appeared from the direction of his campsite, moving northeast on a trail leading down the mountainside.

The man's clothing confirmed what Gordon remembered from those blurred seconds of the attack. At least his assailants weren't wearing army surplus camouflage . . . the trademark of *Holn survivalists*.

They must be just regular, run of the mill, may-they-please-roast-in-Hell bandits.

If so, then there was a sliver of a chance the plan glimmering in his mind just might accomplish something.

Perhaps.

The first bandit had Gordon's all-weather jacket tied around his waist. In his right arm he cradled the pump shotgun Gordon had carried all the way from Montana. "Come on!" the bearded robber yelled back up the trail. "That's

enough gloating. Get that stuff together and move it!"

The leader, Gordon decided.

Another man, smaller and more shabby, hurried into view carrying a cloth sack and a battered rifle. "Boy, what a haul! We oughta celebrate. When we bring this stuff back, can we have all the 'shine we want, Jas?" The small robber hopped like an excited bird. "Boy, Sheba an' the girls'll bust when they hear about that lil' rabbit we drove off into the briar patch. I never seen anything run so fast!" He giggled.

Gordon frowned at the insult added to injury. It was the same nearly everywhere he had been—a postholocaust callousness to which he'd never grown accustomed, even after all this time. With only one eye peering through the scrub grass rimming his cleft, he took a deep breath and shouted.

"I wouldn't count on getting drunk yet, Brer Bear!" Adrenaline turned his voice more shrill than he wanted, but that couldn't be helped.

The big man dropped awkwardly to the ground, scrambling for cover behind a nearby tree. The skinny robber, though, gawked up at the hillside.

"What . . . ? Who's up there?"

Gordon felt a small wash of relief. Their behavior confirmed that the sons of bitches weren't true survivalists. Certainly not *Holnists*. If they had been, he'd probably be dead by now.

The other bandits—Gordon counted a total of five—hurried down the trail carrying their booty. "Get down!" their leader commanded from his hiding place. Scrawny seemed to wake up to his exposed position and hurried to join his comrades behind the undergrowth.

All except one robber—a sallow-faced man with salt-and-pepper sideburns, wearing an alpine hat. Instead of hiding he moved forward a little, chewing a pine needle and casually eyeing the thicket.

"Why bother?" he asked calmly. "That poor fellow had on barely more than his skivvies, when we pounced him. We've got his shotgun. Let's find out what he wants."

Gordon kept his head down. But he couldn't help noticing the man's lazy, affected drawl. He was the only one who was clean shaven, and even from here Gordon could tell that his clothes were cleaner, more meticulously tended.

At a muttered growl from his leader, the casual bandit shrugged and sauntered over behind a forked pine. Barely hidden, he called up the hillside. "Are you there, Mister Rabbit? If so, I am so sorry you didn't stay to invite us to tea. Still, aware how Jas and Little Wally tend to treat visitors, I suppose I cannot blame you for cutting out."

Gordon couldn't believe he was trading banter with this twit. "That's what I figured at the time," he called. "Thanks for understanding my lack of hospitality. By the way, with whom am I speaking?"

The tall fellow smiled broadly. "With *whom* . . . ? Ah, a grammarian! What joy. It's been so long since I've heard an educated voice." He doffed the alpine hat and bowed. "I am Roger Everett Septien, at one time a member of the Pacific Stock Exchange, and presently your robber. As for my colleagues . . ."

The bushes rustled. Septien listened, and finally shrugged. "Alas," he called to Gordon. "Normally I'd be tempted by a chance for some real conversation; I'm sure you're as starved for it as I. Unfortunately, the leader of our small brotherhood of cutthroats insists that I find out what you want and get this over with.

"So speak your piece, Mister Rabbit. We are all ears."

Gordon shook his head. The fellow obviously classed himself a wit, but his humor was fourth-rate, even by post-war standards. "I notice you fellows aren't carrying *all* of my gear. You wouldn't by some chance have decided to take only what you needed, and left enough for me to survive, would you?"

From the scrub below came a high giggle, then more hoarse chuckles as others joined in. Roger Septien looked left and right and lifted his hands. His exaggerated sigh seemed to say that *he*, at least, appreciated the irony in Gordon's question.

"Alas," he repeated. "I recall mentioning that possibility to my compatriots. For instance, our women might find some use for your aluminum tent poles and pack frame, but I suggested we leave the nylon bag and tent, which are useless to us.

"Um, in a sense we have done this. However, I don't think that Wally's . . . er, *alterations* will meet your approval."

Again, that shrieking giggle rose from the bushes. Gordon sagged a little.

"What about my boots? You all seem well enough shod. Do they fit any of you, anyway? Could you leave them? And my jacket and gloves?"

Septien coughed. "Ah, yes. They're the main items, aren't they? Other than the shotgun, of course, which is nonnegotiable."

Gordon spat. *Of course, idiot. Only a blowhard states the obvious.*

Again, the voice of the bandit leader could be heard, muffled by the foliage. Again there were giggles. With a pained expression, the ex-stockbroker sighed. "My leader asks what you offer in *trade*. Of course I know you have nothing. Still, I must inquire."

As a matter of fact, Gordon had a few things they might want—his belt compass for instance, and a Swiss army knife.

But what were his chances of arranging an exchange and getting out alive? It didn't take telepathy to tell that these bastards were only toying with their victim.

A fuming anger filled him, especially over Septien's false show of compassion. He had witnessed this combination of cruel contempt and civilized manners in other once-educated people, over the years since the Collapse. By his lights, people like this were far more contemptible than those who had simply succumbed to the barbaric times.

"Look," he shouted. "You don't need those damn boots! You've no real need for my jacket or my toothbrush or my notebook, either. This area's clean, so what do you need my Geiger counter for?"

"I'm not stupid enough to think I can have my shotgun back, but without some of those other things I'll die, damn you!"

The echo of his curse seemed to pour down the long slope of the mountainside, leaving a hanging silence in its wake. Then the bushes rustled and the big bandit leader stood up. Spitting contemptuously upslope, he snapped his fingers at the others. "Now I know he's got no gun," he told them. His thick eyebrows narrowed and he gestured in Gordon's general direction.

"Run away, little rabbit. Run, or we'll skin you and have you for supper!" He hefted Gordon's shotgun, turned his back, and sauntered casually down the trail. The others fell in behind, laughing.

Roger Septien gave the mountainside an ironic shrug and a smile, then gathered up his share of the loot and followed his compatriots. They disappeared around a bend in the narrow forest path, but for minutes afterward Gordon heard the softly diminishing sound of someone happily whistling.

You imbecile! Weak as his chances had been, he had spoiled them completely by appealing to reason and charity. In an era of tooth and claw, nobody ever did that except out of impotence. The bandits' uncertainty had evaporated just as soon as he foolishly asked for fair play.

Of course he could have fired his .38, wasting a precious bullet to *prove* he wasn't completely harmless. That would have forced them to take him seriously again. . . .

Then why didn't I do that? Was I too afraid?

Probably, he admitted. I'll very likely die of exposure tonight, but that's still hours away, far enough to remain only an abstract threat, less frightening and immediate than five ruthless men with guns.

He punched his left palm with his fist.

Oh stuff it, Gordon. You can psychoanalyze yourself this evening, while you're freezing to death. What it all comes down to, though, is that you are one prize fool, and this is probably the end.

He got up stiffly and began edging cautiously down the slope. Although he wasn't quite ready to admit it yet, Gordon felt a growing certainty that there could only be one solution, only one even faintly possible way out of this disaster.

As soon as he was free of the thicket, Gordon limped to the trickling stream to wash his face and the worst of his cuts. He wiped sweat-soaked strands of brown hair out of his eyes. His scrapes hurt like hell, but none of them looked bad enough to persuade him to use the thin tube of the precious iodine in his belt pouch.

He refilled his canteen and thought.

Besides his pistol and half-shredded clothes, a pocket knife, and compass, his pouch held a miniature fishing kit that might prove useful, if he ever made it over the mountains to a decent watershed.

And of course ten spare rounds for his .38, small, blessed relics of industrial civilization.

Back at the beginning, during the riots and the great starvation, it had seemed that the one thing in inexhaustible supply was ammunition. If only turn-of-the-century America had stockpiled and distributed food half so well as its citizens had cached mountains of bullets . . .

Rough stones jabbed his throbbing left foot as Gordon gingerly hurried toward his former campsite. Clearly these half-shredded moccasins would get him nowhere. His torn clothes would be about as effective against freezing mountain autumn nights as his pleas had been against the bandits' hard hearts.

The small clearing where he had made camp only an hour or so ago was deserted now, but his worst fears were surpassed by the havoc he found there.

His tent had been converted into a pile of nylon shreds, his sleeping bag a small blizzard of scattered goose down. All Gordon found intact was the slim longbow he had been carving from a cut sapling, and a line of experimental venison-gut strings.

Probably thought it was a walking stick. Sixteen years after the last factory had burned, Gordon's robbers had completely overlooked the potential value of the bow and strings, when the ammo finally ran out.

He used the bow to poke through the wreckage, looking for anything else to salvage.

I can't believe it. They took my journal! That prig Sep-tien probably looks forward to poring over it during the snow time, chuckling over my adventures and my naivete while my bones are being picked clean by cougars and buzzards.

Of course the food was all gone: the jerky; the bag of split grains that a small Idaho village had let him have in exchange for a few songs and stories; the tiny hoard of rock candy he had found in the mechanical bowels of a looted vending machine.

It's just as well about the candy, Gordon thought as he plucked his trampled, ruined toothbrush out of the dust.

Now why the hell did they have to do that?

Late in the Three-Year Winter—while the remnants of his militia platoon still struggled to guard the soy silos of Wayne, Minnesota, for a government nobody had heard from in months—five of his comrades had died of raging oral infections. They were awful, unglorious deaths, and no one had even been sure if one of the war bugs was responsible, or the cold and hunger and near total lack of modern hygiene. All Gordon knew was that the specter of his teeth rotting in his head was his own personal phobia.

Bastards, he thought as he flung the little brush aside.

He kicked the rubbish one last time. There was nothing here to change his mind.

You're procrastinating. Go. Do it.

Gordon started off a little stiffly. But soon he was moving downtrail as quickly and silently as he could, making time through the bone-dry forest.

The burly outlaw leader had promised to eat him if they met again. Cannibalism had been common in the early days, and these mountain men might have acquired a taste for the "long pork." Still, he had to persuade them that a man with nothing to lose must be reckoned with.

Within half a mile or so, their tracks were familiar to him: two traces with the soft outlines of deer hide and three with prewar Vibram soles. They were moving at a leisurely pace, and it would be no trouble simply to catch up with his enemies.

That was not his plan, however. Gordon tried to remember this morning's climb up this same trail.

The path drops in altitude as it winds north, along the east face of the mountain, before switching back south and east into the desert valley below.

But what if I were to cut above the main trail, and traverse the slope higher up? I might be able to come down on them while it's still light . . . while they're still gloating and expecting nothing.

If the shortcut is there. . . .

The trail wove gradually downhill toward the northeast, in the direction of the lengthening shadows, toward the deserts of eastern Oregon and Idaho. Gordon must have passed below the robbers' sentinels yesterday or this morning, and they had taken their time following him until he was settled into camp. Their lair had to be somewhere off this same trail.

Even limping, Gordon was able to move silently and quickly, the only advantage of camp moccasins over boots. Soon he heard faint sounds below and ahead.

The raiding party. The men were laughing, joking together. It was painful to hear.

It wasn't so much that they were laughing over him. Callous cruelty was a part of life today, and if Gordon couldn't reconcile himself to it, he at least recognized he was the Twentieth-Century oddball in today's savage world.

But the sounds reminded him of other laughter, the rough jokes of men who shared danger together.

Drew Simms—freckle-faced pre-med with a floppy grin and deadly skill at chess or poker—the Holnists got him when they overran Wayne and burned the silos. . . .

Tiny Kielre—saved my life twice, and all he wanted when he was on his deathbed, the War Mumps tearing him apart, was for me to read him stories. . . .

Then there had been Lieutenant Van—their half-Vietnamese platoon leader. Gordon had never known until it was too late that the Lieutenant was cutting his own rations and giving them to his men. He asked, at the end, to be buried in an American flag.

Gordon had been alone for so long. He missed the company of such men almost as much as the friendship of women.

Watching the brush on his left, he came to an opening that seemed to promise a sloping track—a shortcut perhaps—to the north across the mountain face. The rust-dry scrub crackled as he left the path and broke his own trail. Gordon thought he remembered the perfect site for a bush-whack, a switchback that passed under a high, stony horse-shoe. A sniper might find a place a little way above that rocky outcrop, within point-blank range of anyone hiking along the hairpin.

If I can just get there first . . .

He might pin them down by surprise and force them to negotiate. That was the advantage in being the one with nothing to lose. Any sane bandit would prefer to live and rob another day. He had to believe they would part with boots, a jacket, and some food, against the risk of losing one or two of their band.

Gordon hoped he would not have to kill anybody.

Oh grow up, please! His worst enemy, over the next few hours, could be his archaic scruples. *Just this once, be ruthless.*

The voices on the trail faded as he cut across the slope of the mountain. Several times he had to detour around jagged gullies or scabrous patches of ugly bramble. Gordon concentrated on finding the quickest way toward his rocky ambushade.

Have I gone far enough?

Grimly, he kept on. According to imperfect memory, the switchback he had in mind came only after a long sweep northward along the east face of the mountain.

A narrow animal track let him hurry through the pine

thickets, pausing frequently to check his compass. He faced a quandary. To stand a chance of catching his adversaries, he had to stay above them. Yet if he kept too high, he might go right past his target without knowing it.

And twilight was not long away.

A flock of wild turkeys scattered as he jogged into a small clearing. Of course the thinned human population probably had something to do with the return of wildlife, but it was also one more sign that he had come into better-watered country than the arid lands of Idaho. His bow might someday prove useful, should he live long enough to learn to use it.

He angled downslope, beginning to get worried. Surely by now the main trail was quite a bit below him, if it hadn't already switched back a few times. It was possible he had already gone too far north.

At last Gordon realized the game path was turning inexorably westward. It appeared to be rising again as well, toward what looked like another gap in the mountains, shrouded in late afternoon mist.

He stopped a moment to catch his breath and his bearings. Perhaps this was yet another pass through the cold, semi-arid Cascade Range, leading eventually into the Willamette River Valley and thence the Pacific Ocean. His map was gone but he knew that at most a couple weeks' walk in that direction ought to bring him to water, shelter, fishing streams, game to hunt, and maybe . . .

And maybe some people trying to put something right in the world again. The sunlight through that high fringe of clouds was like a luminous halo, akin to the dimly remembered skyglow of city lights, a promise that had led him ever onward from the midwest, searching. The dream—hopeless as he knew it was—simply would not go away.

Gordon shook his head. For certain there would be snow in that range, and cougars, and starvation. There could be no turning away from his plan. Not if he wanted to live.

He tried hard to cut downslope, but the narrow game

paths kept forcing him north and westward. The switchback *had* to be behind him, by now. But the thick, dry undergrowth diverted him farther into the new pass.

In his frustration Gordon almost missed the sound. But then he stopped suddenly, listening.

Were those voices?

A steep ravine opened up the forest just ahead. He hurried toward it until he could see the outlines of this mountain and others in the chain, wrapped in a thick haze, amber high on their westward flanks and darkening purple where the sun no longer shone.

The sounds seemed to be coming from below, to the east. And yes, they *were* voices. Gordon searched and made out the snakelike line of a trail on the mountain's flank. Far off, he caught a brief flash of color moving slowly upward through the woods.

The bandits! But why were they moving uphill again? They couldn't be, unless . . .

Unless Gordon was already far north of the trail he had taken the day before. He must have missed the ambush site altogether and come out above a side path. The bandits were climbing a fork he had failed to notice yesterday, one leading up into *this* pass rather than the one he had been caught in.

This must be the way to their base!

Gordon looked up the mountain. Yes, he could see how a small hollow could fit over to the west, on a shoulder near the lesser-used pass. It would be defensible and very hard to discover by chance.

Gordon smiled grimly and turned west as well. The ambush was a lost opportunity, but if he hurried he could beat the bandits home, perhaps get a few minutes to steal what he needed—food, clothes, something to carry them in.

And if the hideout wasn't deserted?

Well, maybe he could take their women hostage and try to cut a deal.

Yeah, that's lots better. Like holding a ticking bomb beats jogging with nitroglycerin.

Frankly, he hated all of his alternatives.

He started to run, ducking under branches and dodging withered stumps as he charged along the narrow game path. Soon Gordon felt a strange exuberance. He was committed, and none of his typical self-doubt would get in the way now. Battle adrenaline nearly made him high as his stride opened and small shrubs swept by in a blur. He stretched to leap over a toppled, decayed tree trunk, cleared it easily. . . .

Landing sent sharp pain lancing up his left leg as something stabbed him through the flimsy moccasins. He sprawled, face first, into the gravel of a dry stream bed.

Gordon rolled over clutching his injury. Through wet, pain-diffracted eyes, he saw that he had tripped over a thick strand of looped, rusted steel cable, no doubt left over from some ancient, prewar logging operation. Again, while his leg throbbled agonizingly, his surface thoughts were absurdly rational.

Eighteen years since my last tetanus shot. Lovely.

But no, it hadn't cut him, only tripped him. That was bad enough, though. He held onto his thigh and clamped his mouth shut, trying to ride out a savage cramp.

At last the tremors subsided and he dragged himself over to the toppled tree, gingerly hoisting himself into sitting position. He hissed through clenched teeth as the waves of agony slowly faded.

Meanwhile he could hear the bandit party passing not far below, taking away the head start that had been his only advantage.

So much for all those great plans to beat them to their hideout. He listened until their voices faded up the trail.

At last Gordon used his bow as a staff and tried standing up. Letting weight settle slowly on his left leg, he found it would support him, though it still quivered tenderly.

Ten years ago I could've taken a fall like that and been up and running without another thought. Face it. You're obsolete, Gordon. Worn out. These days, thirty-four and alone is the same as being ready to die.

There would be no ambush now. He couldn't even chase the bandits, not all the way up to that notch in the mountain. It would be useless to try to track them on a moonless night.

He took a few steps as the throbbing slowly subsided. Soon he was able to walk without leaning too hard on his makeshift staff.

Fine, but where to? Perhaps he should spend the remaining daylight looking for a cave, a pile of pine needles, anything to give him a chance to live through the night.

In the growing chill Gordon watched shadows climb higher above the desert valley floor, merging and darkening the flanks of the nearby mountains. The reddening sun probed through chinks in the range of snowy peaks to his left.

He was facing north, unable quite yet to summon the energy to move, when his eye was caught by a sudden flash of light, a sharp glinting against the rolling forest green on the opposite flank of this narrow pass. Still favoring his tender foot, Gordon took a few steps forward. His brow furrowed.

The forest fires that had seared so much of the dry Cascades had spared the thick forests on that part of the mountainside. And yes, something across the way was catching the sunlight like a mirror. From the folds in the hillsides, he guessed that the reflection could only be seen from this very spot, and only in the late afternoon.

So he had guessed wrong. The bandits' roost wasn't in that hollow higher up in the pass to the west after all, but much closer. Only a stroke of luck had given it away.

So you're giving me clues, now? Now? he accused the world. *I don't have enough troubles as it is, without being offered straws to grasp at?*

Hope was an addiction. It had driven him westward for half his life. Moments after all but giving up, Gordon found himself piecing together the outlines of a new plan.

Could he try to rob a cabin filled with armed men? He pictured himself, kicking in the door to their wide-eyed as-

tonishment, holding them all at bay with the pistol in one hand, while he tied them all up with the other!

Why not? They might be drunk, and he was desperate enough to try. Could he take hostages? Hell, even a milk goat would be more valuable to them than his boots! A captured woman should bring more in trade than that.

The idea was a sour taste in his mouth. It depended on the bandit leader behaving rationally for one thing. Would the bastard recognize the secret power of a desperate man, and let him go with what he needed?

Gordon had seen pride make men do stupid things. More often than not. *If it comes down to a chase, I'm cooked. I couldn't outrun a badger, right now.*

He eyed the reflection across the pass, and decided he had very little choice, after all.

It was slow going from the first. His leg still ached and he had to stop every hundred feet or so to scan merging and crisscrossing trails for his enemy's spoor. He also found he was checking shadows as potential ambushes, and made himself quit. These men weren't Holnists. Indeed, they seemed lazy. Gordon guessed that their pickets would be close to home, if they maintained any at all.

As the light faded, the footprints were lost in the gravelly soil. But Gordon knew where he was going. The glinting reflection could no longer be seen, but the ravine on the opposite shoulder of the mountain saddle was a dark, tree-lined V silhouette. He chose a likely path and hurried ahead.

It was growing dark quickly. A stiff, cold breeze blew damply off the misty heights. Gordon limped up a dry stream bed and leaned on his staff as he climbed a set of switchbacks. Then, when he guessed he was within a quarter mile of his goal, the path suddenly failed.

He kept his forearms up to protect his face while he tried to move quietly through the dry undergrowth. He fought down a lingering, threatening urge to sneeze in the floating dust.

Chilly night fog was flowing down the mountainsides. Soon the ground would shimmer with faintly luminous ground frost. Still, Gordon shivered less from the cold than from nerves. He knew he was getting close. One way or another, he was about to have an encounter with death.

In his youth he had read about heroes, historical and fictional. Nearly all of them, when the time came for action, seemed able to push aside their personal burdens of worry, confusion, angst, for at least the time when action impended. But Gordon's mind didn't seem to work that way. Instead it just filled with more and more complexities, a turmoil of regrets.

It wasn't that he had doubts about what had to be done. By every standard he lived by, this was the right thing to do. Survival demanded it. And anyway, if he was to be a dead man, at least he could make the mountains a little safer for the next wayfarer by taking a few of the bastards with him.

Still, the nearer he drew to the confrontation, the more he realized that he hadn't wanted his dharma to come to this. He did not really wish to kill any of these men.

It had been this way even as, with Lieutenant Van's little platoon, he had struggled to help maintain a peace—and a fragment of a nation—that had already died.

And afterward, he had chosen the life of a minstrel, a traveling actor and laborer—partly in order to keep moving, searching for a light, somewhere.

A few of the surviving postwar communities were known to accept outsiders as new members. Women were always welcome, of course, but some accepted new men. And yet there was so often a catch. A new male frequently had to duel-kill for the right to sit at a communal table, or bring back a scalp from a feuding clan to prove his prowess. There were few real Holnists anymore, in the plains and Rockies. But many survivor outposts he had encountered nevertheless demanded rituals of which Gordon wanted no part.

And now here he was, counting bullets, a part of him

coldly noting that, if he made them count, there were probably enough for all the bandits.

Another sparse berry thicket blocked his path. What the patch lacked in fruit it made up for in thorns. This time Gordon moved along its edge, carefully picking his way in the gathering gloom. His sense of direction—honed after fourteen years of wandering—was automatic. He moved silently, cautious without rising above the maelstrom of his own thoughts.

All considered, it was amazing a man like him had lived this long. Everyone he had known or admired as a boy had died, along with all the hopes any of them had had. The soft world made for dreamers like himself broke apart when he was only eighteen. Long since then he'd come to realize that his persistent optimism had to be a form of hysterical insanity.

Hell, everybody's crazy, these days.

Yes, he answered himself. *But paranoia and depression are adaptive, now. Idealism is only stupid.*

Gordon paused at a small blob of color. He peered into the bramble and saw, about a yard inside, a solitary clump of blueberries, apparently overlooked by the local black bear. The mist heightened Gordon's sense of smell and he could pick their faint autumn mustiness out of the air.

Ignoring the stabbing thorns, he reached in and drew back a sticky handful. The tart sweetness was a wild thing in his mouth, like Life.

Twilight was almost gone, and a few wan stars winked through a darkling overcast. The cold breeze ruffled his torn shirt and reminded Gordon that it was time to get this business over with, before his hands were too chilled to pull a trigger.

He wiped the stickiness on his pants as he rounded the end of the thicket. And there, suddenly, a hundred feet or so away it seemed, a broad pane of glass glinted at him in the dim skyglow.

Gordon ducked back behind the thorns. He drew his

revolver and held his right wrist with his left hand until his breathing settled. Then he checked the pistol's action. It clicked quietly, in an almost gentle, mechanical complacency. The spare ammo was heavy in his breast pocket.

A hazard to quick or forceful motion, the thicket yielded as he settled back against it, heedless of a few more little scratches. Gordon closed his eyes and meditated for calm and, yes, for forgiveness. In the chilly darkness, the only accompaniment to his breathing was the rhythmic ratchet of the crickets.

A swirl of cold fog blew around him. No, he sighed. *There's no other way.* He raised his weapon and swung around.

The structure looked distinctly odd. For one thing, the distant patch of glass was dark.

That was queer, but stranger still was the silence. He'd have thought the bandits would have a fire going, and that they would be loudly celebrating.

It was nearly too dark to see his own hand. The trees loomed like hulking trolls on every side. Dimly, the glass pane seemed to stand out against some black structure, reflecting silvery highlights of a rolling cloud cover. Thin wisps of haze drifted between Gordon and his objective, confusing the image, making it shimmer.

He walked forward slowly, giving most of his attention to the ground. Now was not the time to step on a dry twig, or to be stabbed by a sharp stone as he shuffled in the dimness.

He glanced up, and once more the eerie feeling struck him. There was something *wrong* about the edifice ahead, made out mostly in silhouette behind the faintly glimmering glass. It didn't look right, somehow. Boxlike, its upper section seemed to be mostly window. Below, it struck him as more like painted metal than wood. At the corners . . .

The fog grew thicker. Gordon could tell his perspective was wrong. He had been looking for a house, or large cottage. As he neared, he realized the thing was actually much

closer than he'd thought. The shape was familiar, as if—
His foot came down on a twig. The "snap!" filled his ears and he crouched, peering into the gloom with a desperate need that transcended sight. It felt as if a frantic power drove out of his eyes, propelled by his terror, demanding the mist be cloven so he could see.

Obediently, it seemed, the dry fog suddenly fell open before him. Pupils dilated, Gordon saw that he was less than two meters from the window . . . his own face reflected, wide-eyed and wild haired . . . and saw, superimposed on his own image, a vacant, skeletal, death mask—a hooded skull grinning in welcome.

Gordon crouched, hypnotized, as a superstitious thrill coursed up his spine. He was unable to bring his weapon to bear, unable to cause his larynx to make sound. The haze swirled as he listened for proof that he had really gone mad—wishing with all his might that the death's head was an illusion.

"Alas, poor Gordon!" The sepulchral image overlay his reflection and seemed to shimmer a greeting. Never, in all these awful years, had Death—owner of the world—manifested to him as a specter. Gordon's numbed mind could think of nothing but to attend the Elsinorian figure's bidding. He waited, unable to take his gaze away, or even to move. The skull and his face . . . his face and the skull. . . . The thing had captured him without a fight, and now seemed content to grin about it.

At last it was something as mundane as a monkey reflex that came to Gordon's aid.

No matter how mesmerizing, how terrifying, no unchanging sight can keep a man riveted forever. Not when it seemed that nothing at all was happening, nothing changing. Where courage and education failed him, where his nervous system had let him down, *boredom* finally took command.

His breath exhaled. He heard it whistle between his teeth. Without willing them to, Gordon felt his eyes turn slightly from the visage of Death.

A part of him noted that the window was set in a door. The handle lay before him. To the left, another window. To the right . . . to the right was the hood.

The . . . hood . . .

The hood of a jeep.

The hood of an abandoned, rusted jeep that lay in a faint rut in the forest gully. . . .

He blinked at the hood of the abandoned, rusted jeep with ancient U.S. government markings, and the skeleton of a poor, dead, civil servant within, skull pressed against the passenger-side window, facing Gordon.

The strangled sigh he let out felt almost ectoplasmic, the relief and embarrassment were so palpable. Gordon straightened up and it felt like unwinding from a fetal position—like being born.

"Oh. Oh Lordie," he said, just to hear his own voice. Moving his arms and legs, he paced a long circle around the vehicle, obsessively glancing at its dead occupant, coming to terms with its reality. He breathed deeply as his pulse settled and the roar in his ears gradually ebbed.

Finally, he sat down on the forest floor with his back against the cool door on the jeep's left side. Trembling, he used both hands as he put the revolver back on safety and slid it into its holster. Then he pulled out his canteen and drank in slow, full swallows. Gordon wished he had something stronger, but water right now tasted as sweet as life.

Night was full, the cold, bone-chilling. Still, Gordon spent a few moments putting off the obvious. He would never find the bandits' roost now, having followed a false clue so far into a pitch dark wilderness. The jeep, at least, offered some form of shelter, better than anything else around.

He hauled himself up and placed his hand on the door lever, calling up motions that had once been second nature to two hundred million of his countrymen and which, after a stubborn moment, forced the latch to give. The door let out a loud screech as he pulled hard and forced it open. He slid onto the cracked vinyl of the seat and inspected the interior.

The jeep was one of those reversed, driver-on-the-right types the post office had used back in the once-upon-a-time of before the Doomwar. The dead mailman—what was left of him—was slumped over on the far side. Gordon avoided looking at the skeleton for the moment.

The storage area of the truck was nearly full with canvas sacks. The smell of old paper filled the small cabin at least as much as the faded odor of the mummified remains.

With a hopeful oath, Gordon snatched up a metal flask from the shift well. It sloshed! To have held liquid for sixteen years or more it had to be well sealed. Gordon swore as he twisted and pried at the cap. He pounded it against the door frame, then attacked it again.

Frustration made his eyes tear, but at last he felt the cap give. Soon he was rewarded with a slow, rough turning, and then the heady, distantly familiar aroma of whiskey.

Maybe I've been a good boy after all.

Maybe there is indeed a God.

He took a mouthful and coughed as the warming fire streamed down. Two more small swallows and he fell back against the seat, breathing almost a sigh.

He wasn't ready yet to face removing the jacket draped over the skeleton's narrow shoulders. Gordon grabbed sacks—bearing the imprint U.S. POSTAL SERVICE—and piled them about himself. Leaving a narrow opening in the door to let in fresh mountain air, he burrowed under the make-shift blankets with his bottle.

At last he looked over at his host, contemplating the dead civil servant's American flag shoulder patch. He unscrewed the flask and this time raised the container toward the hooded garment.

"Believe it or not, Mr. Postman, I always thought you folks gave good and honest service. Oh, people used you as whipping boys a lot, but I know what a tough job you all had. I was proud of you, even before the war.

"But *this*, Mr. Mailman"—he lifted the flask—"this goes beyond anything I'd come to expect! I consider my taxes very well spent." He drank to the postman, coughing a little but relishing the warm glow.

He settled deeper into the mail sacks and looked at the leather jacket, ribs serating its sides, arms hanging loosely at odd angles. Lying still, Gordon felt a sad poignancy—something like homesickness. The jeep, the symbolic, faithful letter carrier, the flag patch . . . they recalled comfort, innocence, cooperation, an easy life that allowed millions of men and women to relax, to smile or argue as they chose, to be tolerant with one another—and to hope to be better people with the passage of time.

Gordon had been ready, today, to kill and to be killed. Now he was glad that had been averted. They had called him "Mr. Rabbit" and left him to die. But it was his privilege, without their ever knowing it, to call the bandits "countrymen," and let them have their lives.

Gordon allowed sleep to come and welcomed back optimism—foolish anachronism that it might be. He lay in a blanket of his own honor, and spent the rest of the night dreaming of parallel worlds.

Snow and soot covered the ancient tree's broken branches and seared bark. It wasn't dead, not quite yet. Here and there tiny shoots of green struggled to emerge, but they weren't doing well. The end was near.

A shadow loomed, and a creature settled onto the drifts, an old, wounded thing of the skies, as near death as the tree.

Pinions drooping, it laboriously began building a nest—a place of dying. Stick by stick, it pecked among the ruined wood on the ground, piling the bits higher until it was clear that it was not a nest at all.

It was a pyre.

The bloody, dying thing settled in atop the kindling, and crooned soft music unlike anything ever heard before. A glow began to build, surrounding the beast soon in a rich purple lambience. Blue flames burst forth.

And the tree seemed to respond. Aged, ruined branches curled forward toward the heat, like an old man warming his hands. Snow shivered and fell, the green patches grew and began to fill the air with a fragrance of renewal.

It was not the creature in the pyre that was reborn, and even in sleep, that surprised Gordon. The great bird was consumed, leaving only bones.

But the tree blossomed, and from its flowering branches things uncurled and drifted off into the air.

He stared in wonderment when he saw that they were balloons, airplanes, and rocket ships. Dreams.

They floated away in all directions, and the air was filled with hope.

A camp robber bird, looking for blue jays to chase, landed on the jeep's hood with a hollow thump. It squawked—once for territoriality and once for pleasure—then began poking through the thick detritus with its beak.

Gordon awakened to the tap-tapping sound. He looked up, bleary-eyed, and saw the gray-flanked bird through the dust-smearing window. It took him moments to remember where he was. The glass windshield, the steering wheel, the smell of metal and paper, all felt like a continuation of one of the night's most vivid dreams, a vision of the old days before the war. He sat dazedly for a few moments, sifting through feelings while the sleep images unraveled and drifted away, out of grasp.

Gordon rubbed his eyes, and presently began to consider his situation.

If he hadn't left an elephant's trail on his way into this hollow last night, he should be perfectly safe right now. The fact that the whiskey had lain here untouched for sixteen years obviously meant the bandits were lazy hunters. They had their traditional stalks and blinds, and had never bothered fully to explore their own mountain.

Gordon felt a bit thick-headed. The war had begun when he was eighteen, a college sophomore, and since then there had been little chance to build a tolerance to eighty-proof liquor. Added to yesterday's series of traumas and adrenaline rushes, the whiskey had left him cotton-mouthed and scratchy behind the eyelids.

He regretted his lost comforts as much as ever. There would be no tea this morning. Nor a damp washcloth, or venison jerky for breakfast. No toothbrush.

Still, Gordon tried to be philosophical. After all, he was alive. He had a feeling there would be times when each of the items stolen from him would be "missed most of all."

With any luck, the Geiger counter wouldn't fall into that category. Radiation had been one of his main reasons for going ever westward, since leaving the Dakotas. He had grown tired of walking everywhere a slave to his precious counter, always afraid it would be stolen or would break down. Rumor had it that the West Coast had been spared the worst of the fallout, suffering more, instead, from plagues wind-borne from Asia.

That had been the way with that strange war. Inconsistent, chaotic, it had stopped far short of the spasm everyone had predicted. Instead it was more like a shotgun blast of one midscale catastrophe after another. By itself, any one of the disasters might have been survivable.

The initial "techno-war" at sea and in space might not have been so terrible had it remained contained, and not spilled over onto the continents.

The diseases weren't as bad as in the Eastern Hemisphere, where the Enemy's weapons went out of control in his own populace. They probably wouldn't have killed so many in America, had the fallout zones not pushed crowds of refugees together, and ruined the delicate network of medical services.

And the starvation might not have been so awful had terrified communities not blocked rails and roads to keep out the germs.

As for the long-dreaded atom, only a tiny fraction of the world's nuclear arsenals were used before the Slavic Resurgence collapsed from within and unexpected victory was declared. Those few score bombs were enough to trigger the Three-Year Winter, but not a Century-Long Night that might have sent Man the way of the dinosaurs. For weeks it appeared that a great miracle of restraint had saved the planet.

So it seemed. And indeed, even the combination—a few bombs, some bugs, and three poor harvests—would not have been enough to ruin a great nation, and with it a world.

But there was another illness, a cancer from within.

Damn you forever, Nathan Holn, Gordon thought. Across a dark continent it was a common litany.

He pushed aside the mail sacks. Ignoring the morning chill, he opened his left belt pouch and pulled out a small package wrapped in aluminum foil, coated with melted wax.

If there ever had been an emergency, this was one. Gordon would need energy to get through the day. A dozen cubes of beef bouillon were all he had, but they would have to do.

Washing down a bitter, salty chunk with a swig from his canteen, Gordon kicked open the left door of the jeep, letting several sacks tumble out onto the frosted ground. He turned to his right and looked at the muffled skeleton that had quietly shared the night with him.

"Mr. Postman, I'm going to give you as close to a decent burial as I can manage with my bare hands. I know that's not much payment for what you've given me. But it's all I can offer." He reached over the narrow, bony shoulder and unlocked the driver's door.

His moccasins slipped on the icy ground as he got out and stepped carefully around to the other side of the jeep.

At least it didn't snow last night. It's so dry up here that the ground ought to thaw enough for digging in a little while.

The rusty right-hand door groaned as he pulled. It was tricky, catching the skeleton in an emptied mail sack as it pitched forward. Gordon somehow managed to get the bundle of clothes and bones laid out on the forest floor.

He was amazed at the state of preservation. The dry climate had almost mummified the postman's remains, giving insects time to clean up without much mess. The rest of the jeep appeared to have been free from mold for all these years.

First he checked the mailman's apparel.

Funny— Why was he wearing a paisley shirt under his jacket?

The garment, once colorful but now faded and stained, was a total loss, but the leather jacket was a wonderful find. If big enough, it would improve his chances immeasurably.

The footgear looked old and cracked, but perhaps serviceable. Carefully, Gordon shook out the gruesome, dry remnants and laid the shoes against his feet.

Maybe a bit large. But then, anything would be better than ripped camp moccasins.

Gordon slid the bones out onto the mail sack with as little violence as he could manage, surprised at how easy it was. Any superstition had been burned out the night before. All that remained was a mild reverence and an ironic gratitude to the former owner of these things. He shook the clothes, holding his breath against the dust, and hung them on a ponderosa branch to air out. He returned to the jeep.

Aha, he thought then. *The mystery of the shirt is solved.* Right next to where he had slept was a long-sleeved blue uniform blouse with Postal Service patches on the shoulders. It looked almost new, in spite of the years. *One for comfort, and another for the boss.*

Gordon had known postmen to do that, when he was a boy. One fellow, during the muggy afternoons of summer, had worn bright Hawaiian shirts as he delivered the mail. The postman had always been grateful for a cool glass of lemonade. Gordon wished he could remember his name.

Shivering in the morning chill, he slipped into the uniform shirt. It was only a little bit large.

"Maybe I'll grow to fill it out," he mumbled, joking weakly with himself. At thirty-four he probably weighed less than he had at seventeen.

The glove compartment contained a brittle map of Oregon to replace the one he had lost. Then, with a shout Gordon grabbed a small square of clear plastic. A scintillator! Far better than his Geiger counter, the little crystal would give off tiny flashes whenever its crystalline interior was struck by gamma radiation. It didn't even need power! Gordon cupped it in front of his eye and watched a few sparse flickerings, caused by cosmic rays. Otherwise, the cube was quiescent.

Now what was a prewar mailman doing with a gadget like that? Gordon wondered idly, as the device went into his pants pocket.

The glove compartment flashlight was a loss, of course, the emergency flares were crumbled paste.

The bag, of course. On the floor below the driver's seat was a large, leather letter carrier's sack. It was dry and cracked, but the straps held when he tugged, and the flaps would keep out water.

It wouldn't come close to replacing his lost Kelty, but the bag would be a vast improvement over nothing at all. He opened the main compartment and bundles of aged correspondence spilled out, breaking into scattered piles as brittle rubber bands snapped apart. Gordon picked up a few of the nearest pieces.

"From the Mayor of Bend, Oregon, to the Chairman of the School of Medicine, University of Oregon, Eugene." Gordon intoned the address as though he were playing Polonius. He flipped through more letters. The addresses sounded pompous and archaic.

"Dr. Franklin Davis, of the small town of Gilchrist sends—with the word URGENT printed clearly on the envelope—a rather bulky letter to the Director of Regional Disbursement of Medical Supplies . . . no doubt pleading priority for his requisitions."

Gordon's sardonic smile faded into a frown as he turned over one letter after another. Something was wrong, here.

He had expected to be amused by junk mail and personal correspondence. But there didn't seem to be a single advertisement in the bag. And while there were many private letters, most of the envelopes appeared to be on one or another type of official stationery.

Well, there wasn't time for voyeurism anyway. He'd take a dozen or so letters for entertainment, and use the backsides for his new journal.

He avoided thinking about the loss of the old volume—sixteen years' tiny scratchings, now doubtless being perused

by that onetime stockbroker robber. It would be read and preserved, he was sure, along with the tiny volumes of verse he had carried in his pack, or he had misread Roger Septien's personality.

Someday, he would come and get them back.

What was a U.S. Postal Service jeep doing out here, anyway? And what had killed the postman? He found part of his answer around at the back of the vehicle—bullet holes in the tailgate window, well grouped midway up the right side.

Gordon looked over to the ponderosa. Yes, the shirt and the jacket each had two holes in the back of the upper chest area.

The attempted hijacking or robbery could not have been prewar. Mail carriers were almost never attacked, even in the late eighties' depression riots, before the "golden age" of the nineties.

Besides, a missing carrier would have been searched for until found.

So, the attack took place *after* the One-Week War. But what was a mailman doing driving alone through the countryside after the United States had effectively ceased to exist? How long afterward had this happened?

The fellow must have driven off from his ambush, seeking obscure roads and trails to get away from his assailants. Maybe he didn't know the severity of his wounds, or simply panicked.

But Gordon suspected that there was another reason the letter carrier had chosen to weave in and out of blackberry thickets to hide deep in forest depths.

"He was protecting his cargo," Gordon whispered. "He measured the chance he'd black out on the road against the possibility of getting to help . . . and decided to cache the mail, rather than try to live."

So, this was a bona fide *postwar* postman. A hero of the flickering twilight of civilization. Gordon thought of the old-time ode of the mails . . . "Neither sleet, nor hail . . ." and

wondered at the fact that some had tried this hard to keep the light alive.

That explained the official letters and the lack of junk mail. He hadn't realized that even a semblance of normality had remained for so long. Of course, a seventeen-year-old militia recruit was unlikely to have seen anything normal. Mob rule and general looting in the main disbursement centers had kept armed authority busy and attrited until the militia finally vanished into the disturbances it had been sent to quell. If men and women elsewhere were behaving more like human beings during those months of horror, Gordon never witnessed it.

The brave story of the postman only served to depress Gordon. This tale of struggle against chaos, by mayors and university professors and postmen, had a "what if" flavor that was too poignant for him to consider for long.

The tailgate opened reluctantly, after some prying. Moving mail sacks aside, he found the letter carrier's hat, with its tarnished badge, an empty lunchbox, and a valuable pair of sunglasses lying in thick dust atop a wheel well.

A small shovel, intended to help free the jeep from road ruts, would now help to bury the driver.

Finally, just behind the driver's seat, broken under several heavy sacks, Gordon found a smashed guitar. A large-caliber bullet had snapped its neck. Near it, a large, yellowed plastic bag held a pound of desiccated herbs that gave off a strong, musky odor. Gordon's recollection hadn't faded enough to forget the aroma of marijuana.

He had envisioned the postman as a middle-aged, balding, conservative type. Gordon now recreated the image, and made the fellow look more like himself, wiry, bearded, with a perpetual, stunned expression that seemed about to say, "Oh, wow."

A neohippy perhaps—a member of a subgeneration that had hardly begun to flower before the war snuffed it out and everything else optimistic—a neohippy dying to protect the establishment's mail. It didn't surprise Gordon in the slightest. He had had friends in the movement, sincere people, if maybe a little strange.

Gordon retrieved the guitar strings and for the first time that morning felt a little guilty.

The letter carrier hadn't even been armed! Gordon remembered reading once that the U.S. Mail operated across the lines for three years into the 1860s Civil War. Perhaps this fellow had trusted his countrymen to respect that tradition.

Post-Chaos America had no tradition but survival. In his travels, Gordon had found that some isolated communities welcomed him in the same way minstrels had been kindly received far and wide in medieval days. In others, wild varieties of paranoia reigned. Even in those rare cases where he had found friendliness, where decent people seemed willing to welcome a stranger, Gordon had always, before long, moved on. Always, he found himself beginning to dream again of wheels turning and things flying in the sky.

It was already midmorning. His gleanings here were enough to make the chances of survival better without a confrontation with the bandits. The sooner he was over the pass then, and into a decent watershed, the better off he would be.

Right now, nothing would serve him half so well as a stream, somewhere out of the range of the bandit gang, where he could fish for trout to fill his belly.

One more task, here. He hefted the shovel.

Hungry or not, you owe the guy this much.

He looked around for a shady spot with soft earth to dig in, and a view.

“... They said, ‘Fear not, Macbeth, till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane’; and now a wood comes to Dunsinane!

“Arm, arm, arm yourselves! If this is what the witch spoke of—that thing out there—there’ll be no running, or hiding here!”

Gordon clutched his wooden sword, contrived from planking and a bit of tin. He motioned to an invisible aide-de-camp.

“I’m gettin’ weary of the sun, and wish the world were undone.

“Ring the alarum bell! Blow, wind! Come wrack! At least we’ll die with harness on our back!”

Gordon squared his shoulders, flourished his sword, and marched Macbeth offstage to his doom.

Out of the light of the tallow lamps, he swiveled to catch a glimpse of his audience. They had loved his earlier acts. But this bastardized, one-man version of Macbeth might have gone over their heads.

An instant after he exited, though, enthusiastic applause began, led by Mrs. Adele Thompson, the leader of this small community. Adults whistled and stamped their feet. Younger citizens clapped awkwardly, those below twenty years of age watching their elders and slapping their hands awkwardly, as if they were taking part in this strange rite for the first time.

Obviously, they had liked his abbreviated version of the

ancient tragedy. Gordon was relieved. To be honest, some parts had been simplified less for brevity than because of his imperfect memory of the original. He had last seen a copy of the play almost a decade ago, and that a half-burned fragment.

Still, the final lines of his soliloquy had been canon. That part about “wind and wrack” he would never forget.

Grinning, Gordon returned to take his bows onstage—a plank-covered garage lift in what had once been the only gas station in the tiny hamlet of Pine View.

Hunger and isolation had driven him to try the hospitality of this mountain village of fenced fields and stout log walls, and the gamble had paid off better than he’d hoped. An exchange of a series of shows for his meals and supplies had tentatively passed by a fair majority of the voting adults, and now the deal seemed settled.

“Bravo! Excellent!” Mrs. Thompson stood in the front row, clapping eagerly. White-haired and bony, but still robust, she turned to encourage the forty-odd others, including small children, to show their appreciation. Gordon did a flourish with one hand, and bowed deeper than before.

Of course his performance had been pure crap. But he was probably the only person within a hundred miles who had once minored in drama. There were “peasants” once again in America, and like his predecessors in the minstrel trade, Gordon had learned to go for the unsubtle in his shows.

Timing his final bow for the moment before the applause began to fade, Gordon hopped off the stage and began removing his slap-dash costume. He had set firm limits; there would be no encore. His stock was theater, and he meant to keep them hungry for it until it was time to leave.

“Marvelous. Just wonderful!” Mrs. Thompson told him as he joined the villagers, now gathering at a buffet table along the back wall. The older children formed a circle around him, staring in wonderment.

Pine View was quite prosperous, compared with so many of the starling villages of the plains and mountains.

In some places a good part of a generation was nearly missing due to the devastating effects the Three-Year Winter had had on children. But here he saw several teenagers and young adults, and even a few oldsters who must have been past middle age when the Doom fell.

They must have fought to save everybody. That pattern had been rarer, but he had seen it, too, here and there.

Everywhere there were traces of those years. Faces pocked from diseases or etched from weariness and war. Two women and a man were amputees and another looked out of one good eye, the other a cloudy mass of cataracts.

He was used to such things—at least on a superficial level. He nodded gratefully to his host.

"Thank you, Mrs. Thompson. I appreciate kind words from a perceptive critic. I'm glad you liked the show."

"No, no seriously," the clan leader insisted, as if Gordon had been trying to be modest. "I haven't been so delighted in years. The Macbeth part at the end there sent shivers up my spine! I only wish I'd watched it on TV back when I had a chance. I didn't know it was so good!

"And that inspiring speech you gave us earlier, that one of Abraham Lincoln's . . . well, you know, we tried to start a school here, in the beginning. But it just didn't work out. We needed every hand, even the kids'. Now though, well, that speech got me to thinking. We've got some old books put away. Maybe now's the time to give it a try again."

Gordon nodded politely. He had seen this syndrome before—the best of the dozen or so types of reception he had experienced over the years, but also among the saddest. It always made him feel like a charlatan, when his shows brought out grand, submerged hopes in a few of the decent, older people who remembered better days . . . hopes that, to his knowledge, had always fallen through before a few weeks or months had passed.

It was as if the seeds of civilization needed more than goodwill and the dreams of aging high school graduates to water them. Gordon often wondered if the right symbol might do the trick—the right *idea*. But he knew his little dramas, however well received, weren't the key. They might

trigger a beginning, once in a great while, but local enthusiasm always failed soon after. He was no traveling messiah. The legends he offered weren't the kind of sustenance needed in order to overcome the inertia of a dark age.

The world turns, and soon the last of the old generation will be gone. Scattered tribes will rule the continent. Perhaps in a thousand years the adventure will begin again. Meanwhile . . .

Gordon was spared hearing more of Mrs. Thompson's sadly unlikely plans. The crowd squeezed out a small, silver-haired, black woman, wiry and leather skinned, who seized Gordon's arm in a friendly, viselike grip.

"Now Adele," she said to the clan matriarch, "Mister Krantz hasn't had a bite since noontime. I think, if we want him able to perform tomorrow night, we'd better feed him. Right?" She squeezed his right arm and obviously thought him undernourished—an impression he was loathe to alter, with the aroma of food wafting his way.

Mrs. Thompson gave the other woman a look of patient indulgence. "Of course, Patricia," she said. "I'll speak with you more about this, later, Mr. Krantz, after Mrs. Howlett has fattened you up a bit." Her smile and her glittering eyes held a touch of intelligent irony, and Gordon found himself reevaluating Adele Thompson. She certainly was nobody's fool.

Mrs. Howlett propelled him through the crowd. Gordon smiled and nodded as hands came out to touch his sleeve. Wide eyes followed his every movement.

Hunger must make me a better actor. I've never had an audience react quite like this before. I wish I knew exactly what it was I did that made them feel this way.

One of those watching him from behind the long buffet table was a young woman barely taller than Mrs. Howlett, with deep, almond eyes and hair blacker than Gordon remembered ever seeing before. Twice, she turned to gently slap the hand of a child who tried to help himself before the honored guest. Each time the girl quickly looked back at Gordon and smiled.

Beside her, a tall, burly young man stroked his reddish

beard and gave Gordon a strange look—as if his eyes were filled with some desperate resignation. Gordon had only a moment to assimilate the two as Mrs. Howlett pulled him over in front of the pretty brunette.

"Abby," she said, "let's have a little bit of everything on a plate for Mr. Krantz. Then he can make up his mind what he wants seconds of. I baked the blueberry pie, Mr. Krantz."

Dizzily, Gordon made a note to have two helpings of the blueberry. It was hard to concentrate on diplomacy, though. He hadn't seen or smelled anything like this in years. The odors distracted him from the disconcerting looks and touching hands.

There was a large, spit-turned, stuffed turkey. A huge, steaming bowl of boiled potatoes, drolled up with beer-soaked jerky, carrots, and onions, was the second course. Down the table Gordon saw apple cobbler and an opened barrel of dried apple flakes. *I must cozen a supply of those, before I leave.*

Skipping further inventory, he eagerly held out his plate. Abby kept watching him as she took it.

The big, frowning redhead suddenly muttered something indecipherable and reached out to grab Gordon's right hand in both of his own. Gordon flinched, but the taciturn fellow would not let go until he answered the grip and shook hands firmly.

The man muttered something too low to follow, nodded, and let go. He bent to kiss the brunette quickly and then stalked off, eyes downcast.

Gordon blinked. *Did I just miss something?* It felt as if some sort of event had just occurred, and had gone completely over his head.

"That was Michael, Abby's husband," Mrs. Howlett said. "He's got to go and relieve Edward at the trap string. But he wanted to stay to see your show, first. When he was little he so used to love to watch TV shows. . . ."

Steam from the plate rose to his face, making Gordon quite dizzy with hunger. Abby blushed and smiled when he thanked her. Mrs. Howlett pulled him over to take a seat on

pile of old tires. "You'll get to talk to Abby, later," the black woman went on. "Now, you eat. Enjoy yourself."

Gordon did not need to be encouraged. He dug in while people looked on curiously and Mrs. Howlett rattled on.

"Good, isn't it? You just sit and eat and pay us no mind. "And when you're all full and you're ready to talk again, I think we'd all like to hear, one more time, how you got to be a mailman."

Gordon looked up at the eager faces above him. He hurriedly took a swig of beer to chase down the too-hot potatoes.

"I'm just a traveler," he said around a half-full mouth while lifting a turkey drumstick. "It's not much of a story how I got the bag and clothes."

He didn't care whether they stared, or touched, or talked at him, so long as they let him eat!

Mrs. Howlett watched him for a few moments. Then, unable to hold back, she started in again. "You know, when I was a little girl we used to give milk and cookies to the mailman. And my father always left a little glass of whiskey on the fence for him the day before New Year's. Dad used to tell us that poem, you know, "Through sleet, through mud, through war, through blight, through bandits and through darkest night . . ."

Gordon choked on a sudden, wayward swallow. He coughed and looked up to see if she was in earnest. A glimmer in his forebrain wanted to dance over the old woman's accidentally magnificent misremembrance. It was rich.

The glimmer faded quickly, though, as he bit into the delicious roast fowl. He hadn't the will to try to figure out what the old woman was driving at.

"Our mailman used to sing to us!"

The speaker, incongruously, was a dark-haired giant with a silver-streaked beard. His eyes seemed to mist as he remembered. "We could hear him coming, on Saturdays when we were home from school, sometimes when he was over a block away.

"He was black, a lot blacker than Mrs. Howlett, or Jim Horton over there. Man, did he have a nice voice! Guess that's how he got the job. He brought me all those mail order coins I used to collect. Ringed the doorbell so he could hand 'em to me, personal, with his own hand."

His voice was hushed with telescoped awe.

"Our mailman just whistled when I was little," said a middle-aged woman with a deeply lined face. She sounded a little disappointed.

"But he was real nice. Later, when I was grown up, I came home from work one day and found out the mailman had saved the life of one of my neighbors. Heard him choking and gave him mouth-to-mouth until th' ambulance came."

A collective sigh rose from the circle of listeners, as if they were hearing the heroic adventures of a single ancient hero. The children listened in wide-eyed silence as the tales grew more and more embroidered. At least the small part of him still paying attention figured they had to be. Some were simply too far-fetched to be believed.

Mrs. Howlett touched Gordon's knee. "Tell us again how you got to be a mailman."

Gordon shrugged a little desperately. "I just found the mailman's fins!" he emphasized around the food in his mouth. The flavors had overcome him, and he felt almost panicky over the way they all *hovered* over him. If the adult villagers wanted to romanticize their memories of men they had once considered lower-class civil servants at best, that was all right. Apparently they associated his performance tonight with the little touches of extroversion they had witnessed in their neighborhood letter carriers, when they had been children. That, too, was okay. They could think anything they damn well pleased, so long as they didn't interrupt his eating!

"Ah—" Several of the villagers looked at each other knowingly and nodded, as if Gordon's answer had had some profound significance. Gordon heard his own words repeated to those on the edges of the circle.

"He found the mailman's things . . . so naturally he became . . ."

His answer must have appeased them, somehow, for the crowd thinned as the villagers moved off to take polite turns at the buffet. It wasn't until much later, on reflection, that he perceived the significance of what had taken place there, under boarded windows and tallow lamps, while he crammed himself near to bursting with good food.