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# THE POSTMAN

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BANTAM BOOKS

TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

THE POSTMAN  
A Bantam Book

PRINTING HISTORY

*Parts of this book appeared earlier in slightly different form: Part I as "The Postman" in the November 1982 issue of Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine, and Part II as "Cyclops" in the March 1984 issue of Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine.*

*Bantam hardcover edition / November 1985  
Bantam paperback edition / November 1986*

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*For information address: Bantam Books, Inc.*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Brin, David.

The postman.

I. Title.

PS3552.R4825P6 1985 813'.54 85-47647

ISBN 0-553-25704-8

*Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada*

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

0 0987654321

... we have found that our clinic has an abundant supply of disinfectants and pain killers of several varieties. We hear these are in short supply in Bend and in the relocation centers up north. We're willing to trade some of these—along with a truckload of de-ionizing resin columns that happened to be abandoned here—for one thousand doses of tetracycline, to guard against the bubonic plague outbreak to the east. Perhaps we'd be willing to settle for an active culture of balomycine-producing yeast, instead, if someone could come up and show us how to maintain it.

Also, we are in desperate need of . . .

The Mayor of Gilchrist must have been a strong-willed man to have persuaded his local emergency committee to offer such a trade. Hoarding, however illogical and uncooperative, was a major contributor to the collapse. It astonished Gordon that there still had been people with this much good sense during the first two years of the Chaos.

He rubbed his eyes. Reading wasn't easy by the light of a pair of homemade candles. But he found it difficult getting to sleep on the soft mattress, and damn if he'd sleep on the floor after so long dreaming of such a bed, in just such a room!

He had been a little sick, earlier. All that food and home-

brewed ale had almost taken him over the line from delirious happiness to utter misery. Somehow, he had teetered along the boundary for several hours of blurrily remembered celebration before at last stumbling into the room they had prepared for him.

There had been a *toothbrush* waiting on his nightstand, and an iron tub filled with hot water.

And soap! In the bath his stomach had settled, and a warm, clean glow spread over his skin.

Gordon smiled when he saw that his postman's uniform had been cleaned and pressed. It lay on a nearby chair; the rips and tears he had crudely patched were now neatly sewn.

He could not fault the people of this tiny hamlet for neglecting his one remaining longing . . . something he had gone without too long to even think about. Enough. This was almost Paradise.

As he lay in a sated haze between a pair of elderly but clean sheets, waiting leisurely for sleep to come, he read a piece of correspondence between two long-dead men.

The Mayor of Gilchrist went on:

We are having extreme difficulty with local gangs of "Survivalists." Fortunately, these infestations of egotists are mostly too paranoid to band together. They're as much trouble to each other as to us, I suppose. Still, they are becoming a real problem.

Our deputy is regularly fired on by well armed men in army surplus camouflage clothing. No doubt the idiots think he's a "Russian Lackey" or some such nonsense.

They have taken to hunting game on a massive scale, killing everything in the forest and doing a typically rotten job of butchering and preserving the meat. Our own hunters come back disgusted over the waste, often having been shot at without provocation.

I know it's a lot to ask, but when you can spare

a platoon from relocation riot duty, could you send them up here to help us root out these self-centered, hoarding, romantic scoundrels from their little filtered armories? Maybe a unit or two of the US Army will convince them that we won the war, and have to cooperate with each other from now on. . . .

He put the letter down.

So it had been that way here, too. The clichéd “last straw” had been this plague of “survivalists”—particularly those following the high priest of violent anarchy, Nathan Holn.

One of Gordon’s duties in the militia had been to help weed out some of those small gangs of city-bred cutthroats and gun nuts. The number of fortified caves and cabins his unit had found—in the prairie and on little lake islands—had been staggering . . . all set up in a rash of paranoia in the difficult decades before the war.

*The irony of it was that we had things turned around! The depression was over. People were at work again and cooperating. Except for a few crazies, it looked like a renaissance was coming, for America and for the world.*

*But we forgot just how much harm a few crazies could do, in America and in the world.*

Of course when the collapse did come, the solitary survivalists’ precious little fortresses did not stay theirs for long. Most of the tiny bastions changed hands a dozen or more times in the first months—they were such tempting targets. The battles had raged all over the plains until every solar collector was shattered, every windmill wrecked, and every cache of valuable medicines scattered in the never-ending search for heavy dope.

Only the ranches and villages, those possessing the right mixture of ruthlessness, internal cohesion, and common sense, survived in the end. By the time the Guard units had all died at their posts, or themselves dissolved into roving gangs of battling survivalists, very few of the original population of armed and armored hermits remained alive.

Gordon looked at the letter’s postmark again. *Nearly two years after the war.* He shook his head. *I never knew anyone held on so long.*

The thought hurt, like a dull wound inside him. Anything that made the last sixteen years seem avoidable was just too hard to imagine.

There was a faint sound. Gordon looked up, wondering if he had imagined it. Then, only slightly louder, another faint knock rapped at the door to his room.

“Come in,” he called. The door opened about halfway. Abby, the petite girl with the vaguely oriental cast to her eyes, smiled timidly from the opening. Gordon refolded the letter and slipped it into its envelope. He smiled.

“Hello, Abby. What’s up?”

“I—I’ve come to ask if there is anything else you needed,” she said a little quickly. “Did you enjoy your bath?”

“Did I now?” Gordon sighed. He found himself slipping back into Macduff’s burr. “Aye, lass. And in particular I appreciated the gift of that toothbrush. Heaven sent, it was.”

“You mentioned you’d lost yours.” She looked at the floor. “I pointed out that we had at least five or six unused ones in the storage room. I’m glad you were pleased.”

“It was your idea?” He bowed. “Then I am indeed in your debt.”

Abby looked up and smiled. “Was that a letter you were just reading? Could I look at it? I’ve never seen a letter before.”

Gordon laughed. “Oh surely you’re not that young! What about before the war?”

Abby blushed at his laughter. “I was only four when it happened. It was so frightening and confusing that I . . . I really don’t remember much from before.”

Gordon blinked. Had it really been that long? Yes. Sixteen years was indeed enough time to have beautiful women in the world who knew nothing but the dark age.

*Amazing,* he thought.

"All right, then." He pushed the chair by his bed. Grinning, she came over and sat beside him. Gordon reached into the sack and pulled out another of the frail, yellowed envelopes. Carefully, he spread out the letter and handed it to her.

Abby looked at it so intently that he thought she was reading the whole thing. She concentrated, her thin eyebrows almost coming together in a crease on her forehead. But finally she handed the letter back. "I guess I can't really read that well. I mean, I can read labels on cans, and stuff. But I never had much practice with handwriting and . . . sentences."

Her voice dropped at the end. She sounded embarrassed, but in a totally unafraid, trusting fashion, as if he were her confessor.

He smiled. "No matter. I'll tell you what it's about." He held the letter up to the candlelight. Abby moved over to sit by his knees on the edge of the bed, her eyes rapt on the pages.

"It's from one John Briggs, of Fort Rock, Oregon, to his former employer in Klamath Falls. . . . I'd guess from the lathe and hobby horse letterhead that Briggs was a retired machinist or carpenter or something. Hmmm."

Gordon concentrated on the barely legible handwriting. "It seems Mr. Briggs was a pretty nice man. Here he's offering to take in his ex-boss's children, until the emergency is over. Also he says he has a good garage machine shop, his own power, and plenty of metal stock. He wants to know if the man wants to order any parts made up, especially things in short supply. . . ."

Gordon's voice faltered. He was still so thick-headed from his excesses that it had just struck him that a beautiful female was sitting on his bed. The depression she made in the mattress tilted his body toward her. He cleared his throat quickly and went back to scanning the letter.

"Briggs mentions something about power levels from the Fort Rock reservoir. . . . Telephones were out, but he was still, oddly enough, getting Eugene on his computer data net. . . ."

Abby looked at him. Apparently much of what he had said about the letter writer might as well have been in a foreign language to her. "Machine shop" and "data net" could have been ancient, magical words of power.

"Why didn't you bring us any letters, here in Pine View?" she asked quite suddenly.

Gordon blinked at the non sequitur. The girl wasn't stupid. One could tell such things. Then why had everything he said, when he arrived here, and later at the party, been completely misunderstood? She still thought he was a *mailman*, as, apparently, did all but a few of the others in this small settlement.

From whom did she imagine they'd get mail?

She probably didn't realize that the letters he carried had been sent long ago, from dead men and women to other dead men and women, or that he carried them for . . . for his own reasons.

The myth that had spontaneously developed here in Pine View depressed Gordon. It was one more sign of the deterioration of civilized minds, many of whom had once been high school and even college graduates. He considered telling her the truth, as brutally and frankly as he could, to stop this fantasy once and for all. He started to.

"There aren't any letters because . . ."

He paused. Again Gordon was aware of her nearness, the scent of her and the gentle curves of her body. Of her trust, as well.

He sighed and looked away. "There aren't any letters for you folks because . . . because I'm coming west out of Idaho, and nobody back there knows you, here in Pine View. From here I'm going to the coast. There might even be some large towns left. Maybe . . ."

"Maybe someone down there will write to us, if we send them a letter first!" Abby's eyes were bright. "Then, when you pass this way again, on your way back to Idaho, you could give us the letters they send, and maybe do another play-act for us like tonight, and we'll have so much beer and pie for you you'll bust!" She hopped a little on the edge of the bed. "By then I'll be able to read better, I promise!"

Gordon shook his head and smiled. It was beyond his right to dash such dreams. "Maybe so, Abby. Maybe so. But you know, you may get to learn to read easier than that. Mrs. Thompson's offered to put it up for a vote to let me stay on here for a while. I guess officially I'd be schoolteacher, though I'd have to prove myself as good a hunter and farmer as anybody. I could give archery lessons. . . ."

He stopped. Abby's expression was open-mouthed in surprise. She shook her head vigorously. "But you haven't heard! They voted on it after you went to take your bath. Mrs. Thompson should be ashamed of trying to bribe a man like you that way, with your important work having to be done!"

He sat forward, not believing his ears. "What did you say?" He had formed hopes of staying in Pine View for at least the cold season, maybe a year or more. Who could tell? Perhaps the wanderlust would leave him, and he could finally find a home.

His sated stupor dissipated. Gordon fought to hold back his anger. To have the chance revoked on the basis of the crowd's childish fantasies!

Abby noticed his agitation and hurried on. "That wasn't the only reason, of course. There was the problem of there being no woman for you. And then . . ." Her voice lowered perceptibly. "And then Mrs. Howlett thought you'd be perfect for helping me and Michael finally have a baby. . . ."

Gordon blinked. "Um," he said, expressing the sudden and complete contents of his mind.

"We've been trying for five years," she explained. "We really want children. But Mr. Horton thinks Michael can't 'cause he had the mumps *really* bad when he was twelve. You remember the real bad mumps, don't you?"

Gordon nodded, recalling friends who had died. The resultant sterility had made for unusual social arrangements everywhere he had traveled.

Still . . .

Abby went on quickly. "Well, it would cause problems if

we asked any of the other men here to . . . to be the body father. I mean, when you live close to people, like this, you have to look on the men who aren't your husband as not being really 'men' . . . at least not that way. I—I don't think I'd like it, and it might cause trouble."

She blushed. "Besides, I'll tell you something if you promise to keep a secret. I don't think any of the other men would be able to give Michael the kind of son he deserves. He's really very smart, you know. He's the only one of us youngsters who can *really* read. . . ."

The flow of strange logic was coming on too fast for Gordon to follow completely. Part of him dispassionately noted that this was all really an intricate and subtle tribal adaptation to a difficult social problem. That part of him though—the last Twentieth-Century intellectual—was still a bit drunk, and meanwhile the rest was starting to realize what Abby was driving at.

"You're different." She smiled at him. "I mean, even Michael saw that right from the start. He's not too happy, but he figures you'll only be through once a year or so, and he could stand that. He'd rather that than never have any kids."

Gordon cleared his throat. "You're sure he feels this way?"

"Oh, yes. Why do you think Mrs. Howlett introduced us in that funny way? It was to make it clear without really saying it out loud. Mrs. Thompson doesn't like it much, but I think that's because she wanted you to stay."

Gordon's mouth felt dry. "How do *you* feel about all this?"

Her expression was enough of an answer. She looked at him as if he were some sort of visiting prophet, or at least a hero out of a story book. "I'd be honored if you'd say yes," she said, quietly, and lowered her eyes.

"And you'd be able to think of me as a man, 'that way'?"

Abby grinned. She answered by crawling up on top of him and planting her mouth intensely upon his.

There was a momentary pause as she shimmied out of her clothes and Gordon turned to snuff out the candles on the bed stand. Beside them lay the letterman's gray uniform cap, its brass badge casting multiple reflections of the dancing flames. The figure of a rider, hunched forward on horseback before bulging saddle bags, seemed to move at a flickering gallop.

*This is another one I owe you, Mr. Postman.*

Abby's smooth skin slid along his side. Her hand slipped into his as he took a deep breath and blew the candles out.

For ten days, Gordon's life followed a new pattern. As if to catch up on six months' road weariness, he slept late each morning and awoke to find Abby gone, like the night's dreams.

Yet her warmth and scent lingered on the sheets when he stretched and opened his eyes. The sunshine streaming through his eastward-facing window was like something new, a springtime in his heart, and not really early autumn at all.

He rarely saw her during the day as he washed and helped with chores until noon—chopping and stacking wood for the community supply and digging a deep pit for a new outhouse. When most of the village gathered for the main meal of the day, Abby returned from tending the flocks. But she spent lunchtime with the younger children, relieving old one-legged Mr. Lothes, their work supervisor. The little ones laughed as she kidded them, plucking the wool that coated their clothes from a morning spent carding skeins for the winter spinning, helping them keep the gray strands out of their food.

She barely glanced at Gordon, but that brief smile was enough. He knew he had no rights beyond these few days, and yet a shared look in the daylight made him feel that it was all real, and not just a dream.

Afternoons he conferred with Mrs. Thompson and the other village leaders, helping them inventory books and

other long-neglected salvage. At intervals, he gave reading and archery lessons.

One day he and Mrs. Thompson traded methods in the art of field medicine while treating a man clawed by a "tiger," what the locals called that new strain of mountain lion which had bred with leopards escaped from zoos in the postwar chaos. The trapper had surprised the beast with its kill, but fortunately, it had only batted him into the brush and let him run away. Gordon and the village matriarch felt sure the wound would heal.

In the evenings all of Pine View gathered in the big garage and Gordon recited stories by Twain and Sayles and Keillor. He led them in singing old folk songs and lovingly remembered commercial jingles, and in playing "Remember When." Then it was time for drama.

Dressed in scrap and foil, he was John Paul Jones, shouting defiance from the deck of the *Bonne Homme Richard*. He was Anton Perceveral, exploring the dangers of a faraway world and the depths of his own potential with a mad robot companion. And he was Doctor Hudson, wading through the horror of the Kenyan Conflict to treat the victims of biological war.

At first Gordon always felt uneasy, putting on a flimsy costume and stomping across the makeshift stage waving his arms, shouting lines only vaguely recalled or made up on the spot. He had never really admired play-acting as a profession, even before the great war.

But it had got him halfway across a continent, and he was good at it. He felt the rapt gaze of the audience, their hunger for wonder and something of the world beyond their narrow valley, and their eagerness warmed him to the task. Pox-scarred and wounded—bent from year after year of back-breaking labor merely to survive—they looked up, the need greatest in eyes clouded with age, a yearning for help doing what they could no longer accomplish alone—remembering.

Wrapped in his roles, he gave them bits and pieces of lost romance. And by the time the last lines of his soliloquy

faded, he too was able to forget the present, at least for a while.

Each night, after he retired, she came to him. For a while she would sit on the edge of his bed and talk of her life, about the flocks, and the village children, and Michael. She brought him books to ask their meanings and questioned him about his youth—about the life of a student in the wonderful days before the Doomwar.

Then, after a time, Abby would smile, put away the dusty volumes, and slide under the covers next to him while he leaned over and took care of the candle.

On the tenth morning, she did not slip away with the predawn light, but instead wakened Gordon with a kiss.

"Hmmm, good morning," he commented, and reached for her, but Abby pulled away. She picked up her clothes, brushing her breasts across the soft hairs of his flat stomach.

"I should let you sleep," she told him. "But I wanted to ask you something." She held her dress in a ball.

"Mmm? What is it?" Gordon stuffed the pillow behind his head for support.

"You're going to be leaving today, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes," he nodded seriously. "It's probably best. I'd like to stay longer, but since I can't, I'd better be heading west again."

"I know," she nodded seriously. "We'll all hate to see you go. But . . . well, I'm going to meet Michael out at the trapline, this evening. I miss him terribly." She touched the side of his face. "That doesn't bother you, does it? I mean, it's been wonderful here with you, but he's my husband and . . ."

He smiled and covered her hand. To his amazement, he had little difficulty with his feelings. He was more envious than jealous of Michael. The desperate logic of their desire for children, and their obvious love for one another, made the situation, in retrospect, as obvious as the need for a

clean break at the end. He only hoped he had done them the favor they sought. For despite their fantasies, it was unlikely he would ever come this way again.

"I have something for you," Abby said. She reached under the bed and pulled out a small silvery object on a chain, and a paper package.

"It's a whistle. Mrs. Howlett says you should have one." She slipped it over his neck and adjusted it until satisfied with the effect.

"Also, she helped me write this *letter*." Abby picked up the little package. "I found some stamps in a drawer in the gas station, but they wouldn't stick on. So I got some money, instead. This is fourteen dollars. Will it be enough?"

She held out a cluster of faded bills.

Gordon couldn't help smiling. Yesterday five or six of the others had privately approached him. He had accepted their little envelopes and similar payments for postage with as straight a face as possible. He might have used the opportunity to charge them something he needed, but the community had already given him a month's stock of jerky, dried apples, and twenty straight arrows for his bow. There was no need, nor had he the desire to extort anything else.

Some of the older citizens had had relatives in Eugene, or Portland, or towns in the Willamette Valley. It was the direction he was heading, so he took the letters. A few were addressed to people who had lived in Oakridge and Blue River. Those he filed deep in the safest part of his sack. The rest, he might as well throw into Crater Lake, for all the good they would ever do, but he pretended anyway.

He soberly counted out a few paper bills, then handed back the rest of the worthless currency. "And who are you writing to?" Gordon asked Abby as he took the letter. He felt as if he were playing Santa Claus, and found himself enjoying it.

"I'm writing to the University. You know, at Eugene? I asked a bunch of questions like, are they taking new students again yet? And do they take married students?" Abby blushed. "I know I'd have to work real hard on my reading to

get good enough. And maybe they aren't recovered enough to take many new students. But Michael's already so smart . . . and by the time we hear from them maybe things will be better."

"By the time you hear . . ." Gordon shook his head.

Abby nodded. "I'll for sure be reading a lot better by then. Mrs. Thompson promises she'll help me. And her husband has agreed to start a school, this winter. I'm going to help with the little kids.

"I hope maybe I can learn to be a teacher. Do you think that's silly?"

Gordon shook his head. He had thought himself beyond surprise, but this touched him. In spite of Abby's totally disproportioned view of the state of the world, her hope warmed him, and he found himself dreaming along with her. There was no harm in wishing, was there?

"Actually," Abby went on, confidentially, twisting her dress in her hands. "One of the big reasons I'm writing is to get a . . . a pen pal. That's the word, isn't it? I'm hoping maybe someone in Eugene will write to me. That way we'll get letters, here. I'd love to get a letter.

"Also"—her gaze fell—"that will give you another reason to come back, in a year or so . . . besides maybe wanting to see the baby."

She looked up and dimpled. "I got the idea from your Sherlock Holmes play. That's an 'ulterior motive,' isn't it?"

She was so delighted with her own cleverness, and so eager for his approval—Gordon felt a great, almost painful rush of tenderness. Tears welled as he reached out and pulled her into an embrace. He held her tightly and rocked slowly, his eyes shut against reality, and he breathed in with her sweet smell a light and optimism he had thought gone from the world.

"Well, this is where I turn back." Mrs. Thompson shook hands with Gordon. "Down this road things should be pretty tame until you get to Davis Lake. The last of the old loner survivalists that way wiped each other out some years back, though I'd still be careful if I were you."

There was a chill in the air, for autumn had arrived in full. Gordon zipped up the old letter carrier's jacket and adjusted the leather bag as the straight-backed old woman handed him an old roadmap.

"I had Jimmie Horton mark the places we know of, where homesteaders have set up. I wouldn't bother any of them unless you have to. Mostly they're a suspicious type, likely to shoot first. We've only been trading with the nearest for a short time."

Gordon nodded. He folded the map carefully and slipped it into a pouch. He felt rested and ready. He would regret leaving Pine View as much as any haven in recent memory. But now that he was resigned to going, he actually felt a growing eagerness to be traveling, to see what had happened in the rest of Oregon.

In the years since he had left the wreckage of Minnesota, he had found ever wilder signs of the dark age. But now he was in a new watershed. This had once been a pleasant state with dispersed light industry, productive farms, and an elevated level of culture. Perhaps it was merely Abby's innocence infecting him. But logically, the Willamette

Valley would be the place to look for civilization, if it existed anywhere anymore.

He took the old woman's hand once again. "Mrs. Thompson, I'm not sure I could ever repay what you people have done for me."

She shook her head. Her face was deeply tanned and so wrinkled Gordon was certain she had to be more than the fifty years she claimed.

"No, Gordon, you paid your keep. I would've liked it if you could've stayed and helped me get the school going. But now I see maybe it won't be so hard to do it by ourselves."

She gazed out over her little valley. "You know, we've been living in a kind of a daze, these last years since the crops have started coming in and the hunting's returned. You can tell how bad things have gotten when a bunch of grown men and women, who once had jobs, who read magazines—and filled out their own taxes, for Heaven's sake—start treating a poor, battered, wandering play-actor as if he was something like the Easter Bunny." She looked back at him. "Even Jim Horton gave you a couple of 'letters' to deliver, didn't he?"

Gordon's face felt hot. For a moment he was too embarrassed to face her. Then, all at once, he burst out laughing. He wiped his eyes in relief at having the group fantasy lifted from his shoulders.

Mrs. Thompson chuckled as well. "Oh, it was harmless I think. And more than that. You've served as a . . . you know, that old automobile thing . . . a *catalyst* I think. You know, the children are already exploring ruins for miles around—between chores and supper—bringing me all the books they find. I won't have any trouble making school into a privilege.

"Imagine, *punishing* them by suspending 'em from class! I hope Bobbie and I handle it right."

"I wish you the best of luck, Mrs. Thompson," Gordon said sincerely. "God, it would be nice to see a light, somewhere in all this desolation."

"Right, son. That'd be bliss."

Mrs. Thompson sighed. "I'd recommend you wait a year, but come on back. You're kind . . . you treated my people well. And you're discreet about some things, like that business with Abby and Michael."

She frowned momentarily. "I *think* I understand what went on there, and I guess it's for the best. Got to adjust, I suppose. Anyway, like I said, you're always welcome back."

Mrs. Thompson turned to go, walked two paces, then paused. She half turned to look back at Gordon. For a moment her face betrayed a hint of confusion and wonder. "You aren't *really* a postman, are you?" she asked suddenly.

Gordon smiled. He set the cap, with its bright brass emblem, on his head. "If I bring back some letters, you'll know for sure."

She nodded, gruffly, then set off up the ruined asphalt road. Gordon watched her until she passed the first bend, then he turned about to the west, and the long downgrade toward the Pacific.

The barricades had been long abandoned. The baffle wall on Highway 58, at the east end of Oakridge, had weathered into a tumbled tell of concrete debris and curled, rusting steel. The town itself was silent. This end, at least, was clearly long abandoned.

Gordon looked down the main street, reading its story. Two, possibly three, pitched battles had been fought here. A storefront with a canted sign—EMERGENCY SERVICES CLINIC—sat at the center of a major circle of devastation.

Three intact panes reflected morning sunlight from the top floor of a hotel. Elsewhere though, even where store windows had been boarded, the prismatic sparkle of shattered glass glistened on the buckled pavement.

Not that he had really expected anything better, but some of the feelings he had carried with him out of Pine View had led to hopes for more islands of peace, especially now that he was in the fertile watershed of the Willamette Valley. If no living town, at least Oakridge might have shown other signs conducive to optimism. There might have been traces of methodical reclamation, for instance. If an industrial civilization existed here in Oregon, towns such as this one should have been harvested of anything usable.

But just twenty yards from his vantage point Gordon saw the wreckage of a gas station—a big mechanic's tool cabinet lay on its side, its store of wrenches, pliers, and replacement wiring scattered on the oil-stained floor. A row of

never-used tires still hung on a rack high above the service lifts.

From this, Gordon knew Oakridge to be the worst of all possible Oakridges, at least from his point of view. The things needed by a machine culture were available at every hand, untouched and rotting . . . implying there was no such technological society anywhere near. At the same time, he would have to pick through the wreckage of fifty waves of previous looters in his search for anything useful to a single traveler like himself.

*Well, he sighed. I've done it before.*

Even sifting through the downtown ruins of Boise, the gleaners before him had missed a small treasure trove of canned food in a loft behind a shoe store . . . some hoarder's stash, long untouched. There was a pattern to such things, worked out over the years. He had his own methods for conducting a search.

Gordon slipped down on the forest side of the barricade baffle and entered the overgrowth. He zigzagged, on the off chance he had been watched. At a place where he could verify landmarks in three different directions, Gordon dropped his leather shoulder bag and cap under an autumn-bright red cedar. He took off the dark brown letter carrier's jacket and laid it on top, then cut brush to cover the cache.

He would go to any lengths to avoid conflict with suspicious locals, but only a fool would leave his weapons behind. There were two types of fighting that could come out of a situation like this. For one, the silence of the bow might be better. For the other, it could be worth expending precious, irreplaceable .38 cartridges. Gordon checked the pistol's action and reholstered it. His bow he carried, along with arrows and a cloth sack for salvage.

In the first few houses, on the outskirts, the early looters had been more exuberant than thorough. Often the wreckage in such places discouraged those who came after, leaving useful items within. He had found it true often before.

Still, by the fourth house Gordon had a poor collection

to show for this theory. His sack contained a pair of boots almost useless from mildew, a magnifying glass, and two spools of thread. He had poked into all the usual and some unconventional hoarder's crannies, and found no food of any sort.

His Pine View jerky wasn't gone, but he had dipped down farther than he liked. His archery was better, and he had bagged a small turkey two days ago. Still, if he didn't have better luck gleaning, he might have to give up on the Willamette Valley for now and get to work on a winter hunting camp.

What he *really* wanted was another haven such as Pine View. But fate had been kind enough, lately. Too much good luck made Gordon suspicious.

He moved on to a fifth house.

The four-poster bed stood in what had once been a prosperous physician's two-story home. Like the rest of the house, the bedroom had been stripped of nearly everything but the furniture. Nevertheless, as he crouched down over the heavy area rug, Gordon thought he might have found something the earlier looters had missed.

The rug seemed out of place. The bed rested upon it, but only with the right pair of legs. The left pair lay directly on the hardwood floor. Either the owner had been sloppy in placing the big, oval carpet, or . . .

Gordon put down his burdens and grabbed the edge of the rug.

*Whew. It's heavy.*

He started rolling it toward the bed.

*Yes!* There was a thin, square crack in the floor, under the carpet. A bed leg pinned the rug over one of two brass door hinges. *A trapdoor.*

He pushed hard on the bedpost. The leg hopped and fell again with a boom. Twice more he shoved and loud echoes reverberated.

On his fourth heave the bedpost snapped in two. Gordon barely escaped impalement on the jagged stub as he

topped onto the mattress. The canopy followed and the aged bed collapsed in a crash. Gordon cursed, fighting with the smothering shroud. He sneezed violently in a cloud of floating dust.

Finally, regaining a bit of sense, he managed to slither out from under the ancient, moldy fabric. He stumbled out of the room, still sputtering and sneezing. The attack subsided slowly. He gripped the upstairs bannister, squinting in that torturous, semi-orgasmic state that comes before a whopping sternutation. His ears rang with an extra murmur that seemed almost like voices.

*Next thing you'll be hearing churchbells*, he told himself.

The final sneeze came at last, in a loud "Ah—chblthooh!" Wiping his eyes, he reentered the bedroom. The trapdoor lay fully exposed, layered under a new coating of dust. Gordon had to pry the edge of the secret panel. Finally, it lifted with a high, rusty skreigh.

Again, it seemed as though some of the sound came from *outside* the house. But when he stopped and listened carefully, Gordon heard nothing. Impatiently, he bent down and brushed aside cobwebs to peer into the cache.

There was a large metal box inside. He poked around hoping for more. After all, the things a prewar doctor might have kept in a locked chest—money and documents—would be of less use to him than canned goods stashed here in a spree of wartime hoarding. But there was nothing other than the box. Gordon hauled it out, puffing.

*Good. It's heavy. Now let's hope it's not gold or any similar crap.* The hinges and lock were rusted. He lifted the haft of his knife to smash the small lock. Then he stopped abruptly.

Now they were unmistakable. The voices were close, too close.

"I think it came from this house!" someone called from the overgrown garden outside. Feet shuffled through the dry leaves. There were steps on the wooden porch.

Gordon sheathed the knife and snatched up his gear.

Leaving the box by the bed, he hurried out of the room to the stairwell.

This was not the best of circumstances to meet other men. In Boise and other mountain ruins there had been almost a code—gleaners from ranches all around could try their luck in the open city, and although the groups and individuals were wary, they seldom preyed on one another. Only one thing could bring them all together—a rumor that someone had sighted a Holnist, somewhere. Otherwise they pretty much left each other alone.

In other places, though, territoriality was the rule—and fiercely enforced. Gordon might be searching in some such clan's turf. A quick departure would, in any case, be discreet.

*Still . . .* he looked back at the strongbox anxiously. *It's mine, damnit!*

Boots clomped noisily downstairs. It was too late to close the trapdoor or hide the heavy treasure chest. Gordon cursed silently and hurried as quietly as he could across the upstairs landing to the narrow attic ladder.

The top floor was little more than a simple, A-frame garret. He had searched among the useless mementos here earlier. Now all he wanted was a hiding place. Gordon kept near the sloping walls to avoid creaks in the floorboards. He chose a trunk near a small, gabled window, and there laid his sack and quiver. Quickly, he strung his bow.

Would they search? In that case, the strongbox would certainly attract attention.

If so, would they take it as an offering and leave him a share of whatever it contained? He had known such things to happen, in places where a primitive sort of honor system worked.

He had the drop on anyone entering the attic, although it was dubious how much good that would do—cornered in a wooden building. The locals doubtless retained, even in the middle of a dark age, the craft of fire making.

At least three pairs of booted feet could be heard now. In rapid, hollow steps, they took the stairs, skirmishing up

one landing at a time. When everyone was on the second floor, Gordon heard a shout.

"Hey Karl, looka this!"

"What? You catch a couple of the kids playing doctor in an old bed ag . . . sheeit!"

There was a loud thump, followed by the hammering of metal on metal.

"Sheeit!" Gordon shook his head. Karl had a limited but expressive vocabulary.

There were shuffling and tearing sounds, accompanied by more scatological exclamations. At last, though, a third voice spoke up loudly.

"Sure was nice of that fellow, findin' this for us. Wish we could thank him. Ought to get to know him so we don't shoot first if we ever see him again."

If that was bait, Gordon wasn't taking. He waited.

"Well, at least he deserves a warning," the first voice said even louder. "We got a shoot first rule, in Oakridge. He better scat before someone puts a hole in him bigger than the gap between a survivalist's ears."

Gordon nodded, taking the warning at face value.

The footsteps receded. They echoed down the stairwell, then out onto the wooden porch.

From the gable overlooking the front entrance, Gordon saw three men leave the house and walk toward the surrounding hemlock grove. They carried rifles and bulging canvas day packs. He hurried to the other windows as they disappeared into the woods, but saw no other motion. No signs of anyone doubling back from another side.

There had been three pairs of feet. He was sure of it. Three voices. And it wasn't likely only one man would stay in ambush, anyway. Still, Gordon was careful as he moved out. He lay down beside the open attic trapdoor, his bow, bag, and quiver next to him, and crawled until his head and shoulders extended out over the opening, slightly above the level of the floor. He drew his revolver, held it out in front of him, and then let gravity swing his head and torso suddenly downward in a fashion an ambusher would hardly expect.

As the blood rushed to his head Gordon was primed to snap off six quick shots at anything that moved.

Nothing did. There was nobody in the second-floor hallway.

He reached for his canvas bag, never taking his gaze from the hallway, and dropped it to clatter on the landing.

The sound triggered no ambush.

Gordon took up his gear and dropped to the next level in a crouch. He quickly moved down the hall, skirmish-style.

The strongbox lay open and empty next to the bed, beside it a scattering of paper trash. As he had expected, there were such curiosities as stock certificates, a stamp collection, and the deed to this house.

But some of the other debris was different.

A torn cardboard container, the cellophane wrapper newly removed, colorfully depicted a pair of happy canoeists with their new, collapsible rifle. Gordon looked at the weapon pictured on the box and stifled a strangled cry. Doubtless there had also been boxes of ammunition.

*Goddamn thieves*, he thought bitterly.

But the other trash almost drove him wild. EMPIRIN WITH CODEINE, ERYTHROMYCIN, MEGAVITAMIN COMPLEX, MORPHINE . . . the labels and boxes were strewn about, but the bottles had been taken.

Carefully handled . . . cached and traded in dribbles . . . these could have bought Gordon admission into almost any hamlet. Why he might even have won a probationary membership in one of the wealthy Wyoming ranch communities!

He remembered a good doctor, whose clinic in the ruins of Butte was a sanctuary protected by all the surrounding villages and clans. Gordon thought of what that sainted gentleman could have done with these.

But his eyesight nearly went dim with dark tunnels of rage when he saw an empty cardboard box whose label read . . . TOOTH POWDER . . .

*My tooth powder!*

Gordon counted to ten. It wasn't enough. He tried controlled breathing. It only helped him focus on his anger. He

stood there, slope-shouldered, feeling impotent to answer this one more unkindness by the world.

*It's all right, he told himself. I'm alive. And if I can get back to my backpack, I'll probably stay alive. Next year, if it comes, I can worry about my teeth rotting out of my head.*

Gordon picked up his gear and resumed his stalking exit out of that house of false expectations.

A man who spends a long time alone in the wilderness can have one great advantage over even a very good hunter—if that hunter nevertheless goes home to friends and companions most nights. The difference is a trait in kinship with the animals, with the wilds themselves. It was something as undefinable as that which made him nervous. Gordon sensed that something was odd long before he could attribute it. The feeling would not go away.

He had been retracing his steps toward the eastern edge of town, where his gear was cached. Now, though, he stopped and considered. Was he overreacting? He was no Jeremiah Johnson, to read the sounds and smells of the woods like streetsigns in a city. Still, he looked around for something to back up his unease.

The forest was mostly western hemlock and bigleaf maple with alder saplings growing like weeds in nearly every former open area. It was a far cry from the dry woodlands he had passed through on the east side of the Cascades, where he had been robbed under the sparse ponderosa pines. Here there was a scent of life richer than anything he remembered since before the Three-Year Winter.

Animal sounds had been scant until he stopped moving. But as he kept still, a flow of avian chatter and movement soon began to flow back into this patch of forest. Gray-feathered camp robbers flitted in small groups from spot to spot, playing guerrilla war with lesser jays for the best of the tiny, bug-rich glades. Smaller birds hopped from branch to branch, chirping and foraging.

Birds in this size range had no great love for man, but

neither did they go to great lengths to avoid him, if he was quiet.

*Then why am I nervous as a cat?*

There was a brief snapping sound to his left, near one of the ubiquitous blackberry thickets, about twenty yards away. Gordon whirled, but there, too, there were birds.

Correction. A bird. A mockingbird.

The creature swooped up through the branches and landed in a bundle of twigs Gordon guessed to be its nest. It stood there, like a small lordling, haughty and proud, then it squawked and dove toward the thicket again. As it passed out of sight, there was another tiny rustle, then the mockingbird swooped into view again.

Gordon idly picked at the loam with his bow while loosening the loop on his revolver, trying hard to maintain a frozen expression of nonchalance. He whistled through fear-dry lips as he walked slowly, moving neither toward the thicket nor away from it, but in the direction of a large grand fir.

Something behind that thicket had set off the mockingbird's nest defense response, and that something was trying hard to ignore the nuisance attacks—to stay silently hidden.

Alerted, Gordon recognized a hunting blind. He sauntered with exaggerated carelessness. But as soon as he passed behind the fir, he drew his revolver and ran into the forest at a sharp angle, crouching, trying to keep the bulk of the tree between himself and the blackberry bramble.

He remained in the tree's umbra only a moment. Surprise protected him a moment longer. Then the cracking of three loud shots, all of different caliber, diffracted down the lattice of trees. Gordon sprinted to a fallen log at the top of a small rise. Three more bangs pealed out as he dove over the decaying trunk, and hit the ground on the other side to a sharp snapping sound and stabbing pain in his right arm.

He felt a moment's blind panic as the hand holding his revolver cramped. If he had broken his arm . . .

Blood soaked the cuff of his U.S. Government Issue

tunic. Dread exaggerated the pain until he pulled back his sleeve and saw a long, shallow gash, with slivers of wood hanging from the laceration. It was the bow that had broken, stabbing him as he fell on it.

Gordon threw the fragments aside and scrambled on hands and knees up a narrow gully to the right, keeping low to take advantage of the creekbed and underbrush. Behind him whoops of gleeful chase carried over the tiny hillock.

The following minutes were a blur of whipping branches and sudden zigzags. When he splashed into a narrow rivulet, Gordon whirled, then hurried against the flow.

Hunted men often will run downstream, he remembered, racing upslope, hoping his enemies knew that bit of trivia. He hopped from stone to stone, trying not to dislodge mud into the water. Then he jumped off into the forest again.

There were shouts behind him. Gordon's own footfalls seemed loud enough to wake sleeping bears. Twice, he caught his breath behind boulders or clumps of foliage, thinking as well as practicing silence.

Finally, the shouts diminished with distance. Gordon sighed as he settled back against a large oak and pulled out his belt-pouch aid kit. The wound would be all right. There was no reason to expect infection from the polished wood of the bow. It hurt like hell but the tear was far from vessels or tendons. He bound it in boiled cloth and simply ignored the pain as he got up and looked around.

To his surprise, he recognized two landmarks at once . . . the towering, shattered sign of the Oakridge Motel, seen over the treetops, and a cattle grate across a worn asphalt path just to the east.

Gordon moved quickly to the place where he had cached his goods. They were exactly as he had left them. Apparently, the Fates were not so subtle as to deal him another blow just yet. He knew they didn't operate that way. They always let you hope for a while longer, then strung it out before they *really* let you have it.

. . .

Now the stalked turned stalker. Cautiously, Gordon sought out the blackberry blind, with its irate resident mockingbird. As expected, it was empty now. He crept around behind to get the ambushers' point of view, and sat there for a few minutes as the afternoon waned, looking and thinking.

They had had the drop on him, that was for certain. From this point of view it was hard to see how they had missed when the three men fired on him.

Were they so surprised by his sudden break for it? They must have had semi-automatic weapons, yet he only remembered six shots. Either they were being *very* stingy with ammo or . . .

He approached the grand fir across the clearing. Two fresh scars blemished the bark, ten feet up.

*Ten feet. They couldn't be such bad marksmen.*

So. It all fit. They had never meant to kill him at all. They had aimed high on purpose, to give him a scare and drive him off. No wonder his pursuers never really came close to catching him during his escape into the forest.

Gordon's lip curled. Ironically, this made his assailants easier to hate. Unthinking malice he had come to accept, as one must accept foul weather and savage beasts. So many former Americans had become little better than barbarians.

But calculated *contempt* like this was something he had to take personally. These men had the concept of mercy; still they had robbed, injured, and terrorized him.

He remembered Roger Septien, taunting him from that bone-dry hillside. These bastards were no better at all.

Gordon picked up their trail a hundred yards to the west of the blind. The bootprints were clear and uncovered . . . almost arrogant in their openness.

He took his time, but he never even considered turning back.

It was approaching dusk before the palisade that surrounded New Oakridge was in sight. An open area that had once been a city park was enclosed by a high, wooden fence.

From within could be heard the lowing of cattle. A horse whinnied. Gordon smelled hay and the rich odors of livestock.

Nearby a still higher palisade surrounded three blocks of what had once been the southwest corner of Oakridge town. A row of two-story buildings half a block long took up the center of the village. Gordon could see the tops of these over the wall, and a water tower with a crow's nest atop it. A silhouetted figure stood watch, looking out over the dimming forest.

It looked like a prosperous community, perhaps the best-off he had encountered since leaving Idaho.

Trees had been cut to make a free-fire zone around the village wall, but that was some time ago. Undergrowth half as high as a man had encroached on the cleared field.

*Well there can't be many survivalists in the area, anymore, Gordon thought, or they'd be a whole lot less careless. Let's see what the main entrance is like.*

He skirted around the open area toward the south side of the village. On hearing voices he drew up cautiously behind a curtain of undergrowth.

A large wooden gate swung open. Two armed men sauntered out, looked around, then waved to someone within. With a shout and a snap of reins, a wagon pulled by two draft horses sallied through then stopped. The driver turned to speak to the two guards.

"Tell the Mayor I appreciate the loan, Jeff. I know my stead is in the hole pretty deep. But we'll pay him back out of next year's harvest, for sure. He already owns a piece of the farm, so it ought to be a good investment for him."

One of the guards nodded. "Sure thing, Sonny. Now you be careful on your way out, okay? Some of the boys spotted a loner down at the east end of old town, today. There was some shootin'."

The farmer's breath caught audibly. "Was anyone hurt? Are you sure it was just a loner?"

"Yeah, pretty sure. He ran like a rabbit according to Bob."

Gordon's pulse pounded faster. The insults had reached a point almost beyond bearing. He put his left hand inside his shirt and felt the whistle Abby had given him, hanging from its chain around his neck. He took some comfort from it, remembering decency.

"The feller did the Mayor a real favor, though," the first guard went on. "Found a hidey hole full of drugs before Bob's guys drove him off. Mayor's going to pass some of them around to some of the Owners at a party tonight, to find out what they'll do. I sure wish I moved in those circles."

"Me too," the younger watchman agreed. "Hey Sonny, you think the Mayor might pay you some of your bonus in drugs, if you make quota this year? You could have a real party!"

"Sonny" smiled sheepishly and shrugged. Then, for some reason, his head drooped. The older guard looked at him quizzically.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Sonny shook his head. Gordon could barely hear him when he spoke. "We don't wish for very much anymore, do we, Gary?"

Gary frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean as long as we're wishing to be like the Mayor's cronies, why don't we wish we had a Mayor without cronies at all!"

"I . . ."

"Sally and I had three girls and two boys before th' Doom, Gary."

"I remember, Sonny, but—"

"Hal an' Peter died in th' war, but I counted me an' Sally blessed that all three girls grew up. Blessed!"

"Sonny, it's not your fault. It was just bad luck."

"Bad luck?" The farmer snorted. "One raped to death when those reavers came through, Peggy dead in childbirth, and my little Susan . . . she's got *gray hair*, Gary. She looks like Sally's sister!"

There was a long stretch of silence. The older guard

put his hand on the farmer's arm. "I'll bring a jug around tomorrow, Sonny. I promise. We'll talk about the old days, like we used to."

The farmer nodded without looking up. He shouted "Yaah!" and snapped the reins.

For a long moment the guard looked after the creaking wagon, chewing on a grass stem. Finally, he turned to his younger companion. "Jimmy, did I ever tell you about Portland? Sonny and I used to go there, before the war. They had this mayor, back when I was a kid, who used to pose for . . ."

They passed through the gate, out of Gordon's hearing.

Under other circumstances Gordon might have pondered hours over what that one small conversation had revealed about the social structure of Oakridge and its environs. The farmer's crop indebtedness, for instance—it was a classic early stage of share-kind serfdom. He had read about things like this in sophomore history tutorial, long ago and in another world. They were features of feudalism.

But right now Gordon had no time for philosophy or sociology. His emotions churned. Outrage over what had happened today was nothing next to his anger over the proposed use of the drugs he had found. When he thought of what that doctor in Wyoming could do with such medicines . . . why most of the substances wouldn't even make these ignorant savages high!

Gordon was fed up. His bandaged right arm throbbed.  
*I'll bet I could scale those walls without much trouble,  
find the storage hut, and reclaim what I found . . . along with  
some extra to make up for the insults, the pain, my broken  
bow.*

The image wasn't satisfying enough. Gordon embellished. He envisioned dropping in on the Mayor's "party," and *wasting* all the power-hungry bastards who were making a midget empire out of this corner of the dark age. He imagined acquiring power, power to do good . . . power to *force* these yokels to use the education of their younger days be-

fore the learned generation disappeared forever from the world.

*Why, why is nobody anywhere taking responsibility for putting things right again? I'd help. I'd dedicate my life to such a leader.*

*But the big dreams all seem to be gone. All the good men—like Lieutenant Van and Drew Simms—died defending them. I must be the only one left who still believes in them.*

Leaving was out of the question, of course. A combination of pride, obstinacy, and simple gonadal fury rooted him in his tracks. Here he would do battle, and that was that.

*Maybe there's an idealists' militia, in Heaven or in Hell. I guess I'll find out soon.*

Fortunately, the war hormones left a little space for his forebrain to choose *tactics*. As the afternoon faded, he thought about what he was going to do.

Gordon stepped back into the shadows and a branch brushed by, dislodging his cap. He caught it before it fell to the ground, was about to put it back on, but then stopped abruptly and looked at it.

The burnished image of a horseman glinted back at him, a brass figure backed by a ribbon motto in Latin. Gordon watched shifting highlights in the shiny emblem, and slowly, he smiled.

It would be audacious—perhaps much more so than attempting the fence in the darkness. But the idea had a pleasing symmetry that appealed to Gordon. He was probably the last man alive who would choose a path of greater danger purely for aesthetic reasons, and he was glad. If the scheme failed, it would still be spectacular.

It required a brief foray into the ruins of old Oakridge—beyond the postwar village—to a structure certain to be among the least looted in town. He set the cap back on his head as he moved to take advantage of the remaining light.

An hour later, Gordon left the gutted buildings of the old town and stepped briskly along the pitted asphalt road,

retracing his steps in the gathering dusk. Taking a long detour through the forest, he came at last to the road "Sonny" had used, south of the village wall. Now he approached boldly, guided by a solitary lantern hanging over the broad gate.

The guard was criminally lax. Gordon came within thirty feet unchallenged. He saw a shadowy sentry, standing on a parapet over near the far end of the palisade, but the idiot was looking the other way.

Gordon took a deep breath, put Abby's whistle to his lips, and blew three hard blasts. The shrill screams pealed through the buildings and forest like the shriek of a stooping raptor. Hurried footsteps pounded along the parapet. Three men carrying shotguns and oil lanterns appeared above the gate and stared down at him in the gathering twilight.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I must speak with someone in authority," Gordon hailed. "This is official business, and I demand entry to the town of Oakridge!"

That certainly put them off their routine. There was a long, stunned silence as the guards blinked, first at him and then at each other. Finally, one man hurried off while the first speaker cleared his throat. "Uh, come again? Are you feverish? Have you got the Sickness?"

Gordon shook his head. "I am not ill. I am tired and hungry. And angry over being shot at. But settling all that can wait until I have discharged my duty here."

This time the chief guard's voice cracked in blank perplexity. "Dis-discharged your . . . What the *hell* are you talking about, man?"

Hurried footsteps echoed on the parapet. Several more men arrived, followed by a number of children and women who began to string out to the left and right. Discipline, apparently, wasn't well practiced in Oakridge. The local tyrant and his cronies had had things their way for a long time.

Gordon repeated himself. Slowly and firmly, giving it his best Polonius voice.

"I demand to speak with your superiors. You are trying my patience keeping me out here, and it will definitely go

into my report. Now get somebody here with authority to open this gate!"

The crowd thickened until an unbroken forest of silhouettes topped the palisade. They stared down at Gordon as a group of figures appeared on the parapet to the right, carrying lanterns. The onlookers on that side made way for the newcomers.

"Look, loner," the chief guard said, "you're just asking for a bullet. We got no 'official business' with *anyone* outside this valley, haven't since we broke relations with that commie place down at Blakeville, years ago. You can bet your ass I'm not bothering the Mayor for some crazy . . ."

The man turned in surprise as the party of dignitaries reached the gate. "Mr. Mayor . . . I'm sorry about the ruckus, but . . ."

"I was nearby anyway. Heard the commotion. What's going on here?"

The guard gestured. "We got a fellow out there babbling like nothing I've heard since the crazy times. He must be sick, or one of those loonies that always used to come through."

"I'll take care of this."

In the growing darkness the new figure leaned over the parapet. "I'm the Mayor of Oakridge," he announced. "We don't believe in charity, here. But if you're that fellow who found the goodies this afternoon, and graciously donated them to my boys, I'll admit we owe you. I'll have a nice hot meal lowered over the gate. And a blanket. You can sleep there by the road. Tomorrow, though, you gotta be gone. We don't want no diseases here. And from what my guards tell me, you must be delirious."

Gordon smiled. "Your generosity impresses me, Mr. Mayor. But I have come too far on official business to turn away now. First off, can you tell me if Oakridge has a working wireless or fiber optic facility?"

The silence brought on by his non sequitur was long and heavy. Gordon could imagine the Mayor's puzzlement. At last, the bossman answered.

"We haven't had a radio in ten years. Nothing's worked

since then. Why? What has that to do with anythi—”

“That’s a shame. The airwaves have been a shambles since the war, of course . . .” he improvised, “. . . all the radioactivity, you know. But I’d hoped I could try to use your transmitter to report back to my superiors.”

He delivered the lines with aplomb. This time they brought not silence but a surge of amazed whispers up and down the parapet. Gordon guessed that most of the population of Oakridge must be up there by now. He hoped the wall was well built. It was not in his plan to enter the town like Joshua.

He had quite another legend in mind.

“Get a lantern over here!” the Mayor commanded. “Not that one, you idiot! The one with the reflector! Yes. Now shine it on that man. I want a look at him!”

A bulky lamp was brought forth and there was a rattle as light speared out at Gordon. He was expecting it though and neither covered his eyes nor squinted. He shifted the leather bag and turned to bring his costume to the best angle. The letter carrier’s cap, with its polished crest, sat at a rakish angle on his head.

The muttering of the crowd grew louder.

“Mr. Mayor,” he called. “My patience is limited. I already will have to have words with you about the behavior of your boys this afternoon. Don’t force me to exercise my authority in ways both of us would find unpleasant. You’re on the verge of losing your privilege of communication with the rest of the nation.”

The Mayor shifted his weight back and forth rapidly. “Communication? Nation? What is this blither? There’s just the Blakeville commune, those self-righteous twits down at Culp Creek, and Satan knows what savages beyond them. Who the hell *are* you anyway?”

Gordon touched his cap. “Gordon Krantz, of the United States Postal Service. I’m the courier assigned to re-establish a mail route in Idaho and lower Oregon, and general federal inspector for the region.”

And to imagine he had been embarrassed playing

Santa Claus back in Pine View! Gordon hadn’t thought of the last part about being a “federal inspector” until it was out of his mouth. Was it inspiration, or a dare?

*Well, might as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat,* he thought.

The crowd was in tumult. Several times, Gordon heard the words “outside” and “inspector”—and especially “mailman.” When the Mayor shouted for silence, it came slowly, trailing off into a rapt hush.

“So you’re a mailman.” The sneer was sarcastic. “What kind of idiots do you take us for, Krantz? A shiny suit makes you a government official? What government? What proof can you give us? Show us you’re not a wild lunatic, raving with radiation fever!”

Gordon pulled out the papers he had prepared only an hour before, using the seal stamp he had found in the ruins of the Oakridge Post Office.

“I have credentials, here . . .” But he was interrupted at once.

“Keep your papers to yourself, loonie. We’re not letting you come close enough to infect us with your fever!”

The Mayor straightened and waved an arm in the air, addressing his subjects. “You all remember how crazies and imposters used to come around, during the Chaos years, claiming to be everything from the Antichrist to Porky Pig? Well, there’s one fact we can all depend on. Crazies come and crazies go, but there’s only one “government” . . . that’s what we got right here!”

He turned back to Gordon. “You’re lucky this isn’t like the plague years, loonie. Back then a case like yours would’ve called for immediate cure . . . by cremation!”

Gordon cursed silently. The local tyrant was slick and certainly no easy bluff. If they wouldn’t even look at the “credentials” he had forged, the trip into oldtown this afternoon had been wasted. Gordon was down to his last ace. He smiled for the crowd, but he really wanted to cross his fingers.

From a side pocket of the leather bag he pulled out a

small bundle. Gordon made a pretense of shuffling through the packet, squinting at labels he knew by heart.

"Is there a . . . a Donald Smith, here?" he called up at the townspeople.

Heads turned left and right in sudden, hushed conversation. Their confusion was obvious even in the gathering darkness. Finally someone called out.

"He died a year after the war! In the last battle of the warehouses."

There was a tremor in the speaker's voice. Good. Surprise was not the only emotion at work here. Still, he needed something a lot better than that. The Mayor was still staring at him, as perplexed as the others, but when he figured out what Gordon was trying to do, there would be trouble.

"Oh well," Gordon called. "I'll have to confirm that, of course." Before anyone could speak, he hurried on, shuffling the packet in his hand.

"Is there a Mr. or Mrs. Franklin Thompson, in town? Or their son or daughter?"

Now the tide of hushed whispering carried almost a superstitious tone. A woman replied. "Dead! The boy lived until last year. Worked on the Jascowisc stead. His folks were in Portland when it blew."

*Damn!* Gordon had only one name left. It was all very well to strike their hearts with his knowledge, but what he needed was somebody alive!

"Right!" he called. "We'll confirm that. Finally, is there a Grace Horton here? A Miss *Grace Horton* . . ."

"No there ain't no Grace Horton!" the Mayor shouted, confidence and sarcasm back in his voice. "I know everyone in my territory. Never been no Grace Horton in the ten years since I arrived, you imposter!

"Can't you all see what he did? He found an old telephone book in town, and copied down some names to stir us up with." He shook a fist at Gordon. "Buddy, I rule that you are disturbing the peace and endangering the public health! You've got five seconds to be gone before I order my men to fire!"

Gordon exhaled heavily. Now he had no choice. At

least he could beat a retreat and lose nothing more than a little pride.

*It was a good try, but you knew the chances of it working were slim. At least you had the bastard going there, for a little while.*

It was time to go, but to his surprise Gordon found his body would not turn. His feet refused to move. All will to run away had evaporated. The sensible part of him was horrified as he squared his shoulders and called the Mayor's bluff.

"Assault on a postal courier is one of the few federal crimes that the pro tem Congress hasn't suspended for the recovery period, Mr. Mayor. The United States has always protected its mailmen."

He looked coldly into the glare of the lamp. "*Always,*" he emphasized. And for a moment he felt a thrill. He was a courier, at least in spirit. He was an anachronism that the dark age had somehow missed when it systematically went about rubbing idealism from the world. Gordon looked straight toward the dark silhouette of the Mayor, and silently dared him to kill what was left of their shared sovereignty.

For several seconds the silence gathered. Then the Mayor held up his hand. "One!"

He counted slowly, perhaps to give Gordon time to run, and maybe for sadistic effect.

"Two!"

The game was lost. Gordon knew he should leave now, at once. Still, his body would not turn.

"Three!"

*This is the way the last idealist dies,* he thought. These sixteen years of survival had been an accident, an oversight of Nature, about to be corrected. In the end, all of his hard-won pragmatism had finally given way . . . to a gesture.

There was movement on the parapet. Someone at the far left was struggling forward.

The guards raised their shotguns. Gordon thought he saw a few of them move hesitantly—reluctantly. Not that that would do him any good.

The Mayor stretched out the last count, perhaps a bit

unnerved by Gordon's stubbornness. The raised fist began to chop down.

"Mr. Mayor!" a woman's tremulous voice cut in, her words high-pitched with fear as she reached up to grab the bossman's hand. "Please . . . I . . ."

The Mayor shrugged her hands away. "Get away, woman. Get her out of here."

The frail shape backed away from the guards, but she cried out clearly. "I . . . I'm Grace Horton!"

"What?" The Mayor was not alone in turning to stare at her.

"It's my m-maiden name. I was married the year after the second famine. That was before you and your men arrived. . . ."

The crowd reacted noisily. The Mayor cried out, "Fools! He copied her name from a telephone book, I tell you!"

Gordon smiled. He held up the bundle in his hand and touched his cap with the other.

"Good evening, Mizz Horton. It's a lovely night, yes? By the way, I happen to have a letter here for you, from a Mr. Jim Horton, of Pine View, Oregon. . . . He gave it to me twelve days ago. . . ."

The people on the parapet all seemed to be talking at once. There were sudden motions and excited shouts. Gordon cupped his ear to listen to the woman's amazed exclamation, and had to raise his voice to be heard.

"Yes, ma'am. He seemed to be quite well. I'm afraid that's all I have on this trip. But I'll be glad to carry your reply to your brother on my way back, after I finish my circuit down in the valley."

He stepped forward, closer to the light. "One thing though, ma'am. Mr. Horton didn't have enough postage, back in Pine View, so I'm going to have to ask you for ten dollars . . . C.O.D."

The crowd roared.

Next to the glaring lantern the figure of the Mayor turned left and right, waving his arms and shouting. But

nothing he said was heard as the gate swung open and people poured out into the night. They surrounded Gordon, a tight press of hot-faced, excited men, women, children. Some limped. Others bore livid scars or rasped in tuberculin heaviness. And yet at that moment the pain of living seemed as nothing next to a glow of sudden faith.

In the middle of it all Gordon maintained his composure and walked slowly toward the portal. He smiled and nodded, especially to those who reached out and touched his elbow, or the wide curve of his bulging leather bag. The youngsters looked at him in superstitious awe. On many older faces, tears streamed.

Gordon was in the middle of a trembling adrenaline reaction, but he squelched hard on the little glimmering of conscience . . . a touch of shame at this lie.

*The hell with it. It's not my fault they want to believe in the Tooth Fairy. I've finally grown up. I only want what belongs to me!*

*Simpletons.*

Nevertheless, he smiled all around as the hands reached out, and the love surged forth. It flowed about him like a rushing stream and carried him in a wave of desperate, unwonted hope, into the town of Oakridge.