



AT THE CROSSROADS

by DESMOND STONE

REGINALD was a man who took life seriously. He worried a great deal about the future of Germany, and it upset him to know that the members of United Nations were quarrelling again. He carried the cares of his family, his town and most of the wide world all upon his shoulders. While his cobbles muzzled their beer contentedly and sighed for the horses that kept getting away, he had to make himself sick with anxiety because the country had an adverse balance of payments. Reginald had his opinions for everything, and strong prejudices as well. He disliked women in slacks, he hated to read books that tailed off like unresolved chords, and he was emphatic about the need for better manners in the younger generation. All things were his care and concern.

So it was characteristic of the man that he should be thinking furiously behind the wheel of his car when he might have been giving himself the luxury of an empty mind. He had every inducement to relax. His petrol gauge showed full, the spare tyre was hard, his income tax was paid. And ahead lay the prospect of a pleasant drive to Colac Bay (experience had taught him the wisdom of looking at a seaside crib before he rented it). On top of all these things, it was high summer in Southland, though the fields were still green—almost as green as some of the timber being put into new houses. Altogether it was a day for enjoyment—the gorse was in flower, the broom pods were crackling, and decommercialised rabbits were leaping across the road.

But Reginald was driving with eyes that focused without seeing. His mind was cluttered up with thought—mainly of clichés. Reginald was sensitive about words, as about most things. He had inherited all of his old English master's scorn of stereotyped phrases. A red-letter day was like a red rag to him. And he was sick and tired of peaks that were forever snow clad, of people who, no doubt through their own carelessness, got themselves wet as shags. Orgies, it seemed, were always drunken. Rugby defences were inevitably cut to ribbons, people were always towers of strength, never merely helpful.

But it was not about these clichés that Reginald was fuming. His dislike

was concentrated on a single phrase that kept jumping up at him from every paper and periodical he laid hands on. Everything these days, it appeared, was "at the crossroads." Industry, national economies, the arts, the sciences—they were all there. It was not enough that they should be going through a crisis, or having difficult days. They had to be jammed together "at the crossroads." The thing was too silly for words. There could not possibly be room for them all.

AFTER an hour's tidy driving, Reginald put Riverton and the tar-sealed surface both behind him and started on the last lap to Colac. As he emerged from one of a number of dips in the road, he saw, a mile or so ahead, a cloud of dust rising high in the air. It was not big enough for an atom bomb burst, nor did it have the approved mushroom shape. It was such a cloud as a convoy of sheep lorries might throw up. Oddly enough, however, it appeared to be stationary. Reginald pulled the car up, got out, and rubbed the glass on his windscreen. But it made no difference. Still the dust rose thick and grey, and as he headed towards it visibility became rapidly worse. It was like entering into a smoke screen.

Stopping at the centre of the disturbance, Reginald opened his eyes cautiously and gazed out on an extraordinary scene. He was never to forget it. Milling around, tail to tail in a circle at a crossroads, were hundreds of living things—bulls on halters, men in trucks and on foot, farmers with fine fat heifers, women in aprons, meteorologists with gas-filled balloons, even a Father Christmas. It was like a grand parade at an A. and P. show—a grand parade gone haywire.

Such was the din and dust, and so thick the press, that Reginald for a start could make little out clearly. But as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he was able to recognise one or two figures. He could see two bookmakers with pink slips in their hands, though they were offering no odds. And, could it be?—yes, there went the members of the National Orchestra; instruments at the slope; a violinist in the middle crying, "I won't be paraded like a village band, I won't, I won't"; double basses stagger-

ing under their burden; and the whole parade tailing off into little dancing demi-semi quavers.

There were retailers with Father's Day slogans, clerks from the National Airways, little £ note symbols waxing fat and arrogant on the cost of living—and a host of other things, all jammed together at the crossroads. Reginald looked with open mouth at the spectacle. Everything about it was incredible. Even the signposts read strangely. The route to Colac Bay had become the way to "social, spiritual and economic bankruptcy," and the road to Tuatapere was designated the road "to happier days."

REGINALD was a realist. Fantasy or no fantasy, he had to get through to the bay. The crossroads had to be cleared. But all in vain did he yell and hoot and beseech. The cacophony went on as before. Then, in an inspired moment, he pulled from his waistcoat pocket the only possible common denominator—a Rugby referee's whistle. He blew a single fierce blast and the noise dropped at once to the uneasy shuffling of hundreds of feet. Reginald wasted no time.

"You," he cried to the leader of the orchestra, "what's your trouble?"

"They say," said the leader, "we're at the crossroads. We're not paying our way."

"And what of it?" retorted Reginald. "You're not selling groceries, are you? Tell me this, do you play Tchaikovsky?"

"No," admitted the leader with a wave of his bowing arm, "the critics don't like him."

"The critics! Who cares about the critics? What about the people? Play Tchaikovsky and you'll have no further worries."

And so the orchestra marched off to happier days.

Reginald turned quickly to the bookmakers and demanded an explanation. Off-course betting, they told him, had landed them there.

"Wrong," said Reginald sharply. "You've no place here at the crossroads. Off with you down the road to bankruptcy. Quickly now, you ought to have been there long ago."

Already the roads were becoming less choked.

Reginald beckoned to a pretty young waitress in black to come closer, and asked her her business.

"I represent the tourist hotels," she told him.

"And do you still shut the front bar at 6?"

"Yes, sir."

"And breakfast," he persisted. "Is it still bacon and eggs?"

"Well, sometimes it's eggs and bacon, but mostly bacon and eggs."

"Bad," pronounced Reginald with a frown. "Very bad. I'm sorry, but it's bankruptcy for you, too"—and taking the pretty waitress by the hand he led her sobbing past the signpost.

As his confidence increased, Reginald stepped up the rate of dispatch until

traffic was moving in all directions. He told the meteorologists to go back and find a better description for good weather than anti-cyclones; he gave a reprieve to a railway refreshment room proprietor, though cautioning him to stop tying the spoon to the sugar bowl.

"And what," he asked of a big portly farmer announcing himself as the meat industry, "brings you here?"

"Two ways I'm torn," replied the farmer. "Bulk purchase and private enterprise bring me to the crossroads."

"Nonsense," disputed Reginald, running a close eye over the farmer. "You've no right to be here at all. You look fine and fat and healthy to me. Come back when you're lean and hungry."

And so it went on until the congestion was at an end and one man alone stood before Reginald. He described himself as a schoolteacher, a kind of travelling salesman for education.

"And what do you think yourself?" Reginald wanted to know. "Is education really at the crossroads? What of your own pupils?"

"Well," said the schoolteacher hesitantly, "I really don't know. They can express themselves all right, but they can't add."

"Nor," added Reginald, with memories of an office girl who persisted in writing cancel with two l's, "can they spell. . . Yes, I'm inclined to agree with you. This is your place, here at the crossroads."

Point-duty work completed, Reginald walked back to his car, jabbed the engine into life and moved on to Colac, leaving the schoolmaster lonely and forlorn beneath the signposts.

SATISFIED that the crib would do (outside lavs, he supposed, were necessary to the great outdoors), Reginald wasted no time in Colac, stopping only at the pub to steady his nerves. The sun was still shining serenely as he motored back, and the crossroads were deserted when he came to them. There was nothing at all to show what had happened. The signposts bore their familiar designations and the grass on the verges was quite untrampled. It seemed to Reginald that his mind had been playing him false. He began to wonder if he had not imagined the whole thing, and the further he travelled the more he wondered.

Back in Invercargill, he decided to say nothing to his wife. She had never been one for swirling the leaves in her teacup, nor had she ever had much patience with handreading.

"Have a good trip?" she asked him.

"Oh, so-so. You know. Pretty tiring. . . Anything in the paper?"

"No, nothing much. Plenty of accidents, though."

"Anyone I know?"

"No, I don't think so. But there's one queer thing. About a schoolteacher. Listen, I'll read what it says—'A schoolteacher was found dead late this morning at a crossroads near Colac Bay. His hands were wrapped around a signpost. There were no marks of violence on the body. The police are investigating.' . . . Now, isn't that a strange thing? It's a wonder you didn't see it, Reg—I say, Reg. . ."

But Reg didn't say. He couldn't. He had slipped quietly under the table in a faint.