

A New Story from a Member . . .

A FORK IN THE ROAD

by *Barrie Lamb*

THE road narrowed now, and suddenly the heavy blue light of dusk was oppressive. The headlights of the car picked out dense foliage on one side of the road but left the other in shadow.

It was a clear evening, and there was little chance of meeting other traffic, yet the driver's mind was not eased by the fine, quiet night. Great things were happening in the world, and there was not time to enjoy the sky or the heavy scents coming from the gloomy hedgerows.

The car was not merely old, but ancient: it had been one of the last of its kind—indeed of any kind—to be built. The steering column had rusted in its mounting, the tyres were mere shreds of fabric round the shattered wheels, but the old vehicle rolled along as smoothly as a shadow. A hundred yards ahead, at the side of the road, stood a dark figure. The driver of the car had been determined not to stop for any reason, but he could tell that the waiting man was not a tramp, and so he stopped and offered a lift. Without a word of thanks the man opened the rear door and climbed in. The driver didn't remark on his passenger's bad manners: there was nothing to remark on, for courtesy, like many other things, didn't have much meaning any more.

Behind the driver the springs of the car groaned as a heavy weight was lowered on to them.

They were travelling faster now, and ahead, beyond the glare of the headlights, the first stars were showing, stars which until a very few years ago had been hidden from sight. For almost a generation the whole universe had been lost to the eyes of men, and the people on earth—the few who were left—had come to think of creation as nothing more than a shell of reeling black cloud, writhing about the kernel of a shattered world. The unveiling of the night sky after so long had been one of the most awe-inspiring events in man's history.

The laboured breathing of his passenger caused an amused grin to spread over the driver's face and he glanced over his shoulder. The man's body seemed to fill the rear of the car, and in the reflected glare from the headlights his face was just visible. Even to someone accustomed to seeing the ravages of radiation sickness it was not a pleasant sight.

Decades after the war had ended those who had taken shelter underground were at last coming to the surface, back to a world laid waste by atomic missiles. They returned too soon: the night skies were still lit by the lurid glow of radiation and everywhere it was crippling and killing the wretches who had chosen to die on the surface rather than in the gloomy catacombs where they had been living for so long.

The passenger was one of them. From the advanced state of his sickness the driver guessed that the man had been roaming about on the surface for some time. But it was the look of fear and hatred in the man's eyes that disfigured his face, as much as the radiation scars, and that amused the driver.

Outside, the clouds overhead glowed fiercely blue, although it was long past sunset: the sun had no part in the intensity of that strange light. In the headlamps of the car the dilated eyes of predatory horses glimmered momentarily, and long grey feelers from the dark hedges writhed back from the unaccustomed light.

The still human survivors of the holocaust had come back to rediscover a world which was no longer theirs, a world of human and animal mutations which did not recognize them as partners in the scheme of things. Human survivors encountered nothing but indifference or worse from their heirs, creatures remodelled by the Lord Radiation until they were immune to it, as immune as they were to the conceptions of pity and kindness.

The passenger's breathing suddenly became more difficult. Something glimmered faintly in his huge hand, and the smile on the driver's face broadened. Like so many others before him, the man had decided on a last gesture of defiance against the new masters of the earth. But the knife in his hand never reached its target; the effort to strike was too much for the ravaged body, and the man fell back, dead.

A laugh broke from the driver; in the gloom an eight-fingered hand reached out playfully to engage a non-existent gear, and the car leapt forward, farther from the ground, held up by a power of mind that the old human race could not comprehend. A bright moon swam out from behind a fast-growing thunder-head, above a world filled with new life, with no time to mourn for its old masters.

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