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THE CHRISTMAS GUEST
By Mrs. Paul E. King

(Chapter 1)

Gregory looked down at the piece of filled luggage on his bed, wanting to snap its lid shut tightly but almost afraid to do so; afraid that he was just experiencing a pleasant dream and that, eventually, he would awaken and discover it had been just that . . . a dream.

He walked to the window and looked out across campus and for the umpteenth time he told himself that what was ahead was, indeed, very real and not a dream at all: Daniel Kingsley had asked him to go home with him for the Christmas and New Year season. He wasn't dreaming this, nor imagining it, either. It was real; as real as his name was Gregory E. Brownstone.

He pulled the dresser drawer open and once again looked inside, making sure that everything he would need was in the badly-worn but still usable piece of luggage which he would be taking with him. It was so kind and good of his roommate to have asked him.

With a deeply sincere and heartfelt whispered thanks to God, he closed the lid of the luggage. A thrill of excitement raced through him. For the first time, since he couldn't remember when, he would be sharing a Christmas in a home. A Christian home! For him, this was the most exciting and most wonderful thing of all.

He lifted the luggage to the floor and sat on the edge of his bed, willing his mind to go back to that first encounter with his roommate, who was not then his roommate at all but was, like everyone else on campus to him, a perfect stranger.

Both were new on campus; first year students. Each was seeking solitude for his own reason and purpose. He, Gregory, had walked until he found what he felt was the perfect hideaway. Hidden far back from the usual paths and trails of the vast campus acreage, away from the noisy rabble of the crowd, it was a quiet, sequestered place, set apart for the concentrated study which he was sure he would be needing to do to make the grade for the stiff assignments which Professor Benje was noted for meting out to his students.

Thinking he was alone, and wanting just to think and relax before the busy class sessions began, he had sat down on the cool, damp grass in a tree-shaded bower, gloating over having discovered the little haven so near at hand, when his ears picked up a sound. It was muffled at first but gradually it grew in intensity until there was no doubt in his mind what it was: someone else was here; he had gotten here ahead of him, Gregory. And he was praying! Of all things, praying!

He had started to leave but was so drawn to the fervency of the one praying that he couldn't budge from his mossy carpet. He sat like one glued to the spot. He had heard almost everything, he had thought, but praying. The individual praying had a real soul burden. He sensed this. It made him feel extremely uncomfortable and strange. The man was praying for "the lost"; those souls who were without Christ. Was he lost? he remembered having wondered. He didn't know Christ, so, in essence, he would be among those called out in the prayer's fervent prayer, would he not?

He had waited until the man left, an hour later, and then he got to his feet, thankful that he had not been discovered. He had not meant to eavesdrop. Not at all. But the praying, and the prayer, had held him spellbound; he couldn't leave.

For many days, he was restless, feeling something stirring within but unable to define what it was. Then one day he remembered that, up until the time when he had heard the impassioned prayer, he had not had the strange, undefined feeling within himself. This feeling that he was now stirred by and moved by had something to do with what he had heard; but what? Was it because the one praying had seemed to have such a very vital and close relationship and contact with God? he wondered. Or was it because he, Gregory Brownstone, had, for the first time ever, had a personal encounter with a Divine being who really cared about him?

He recalled, now, how he had gone back to the hideaway place day after day, hoping to hear again the voice of the one calling so intimately upon his God for the salvation of souls on campus as well as for strength and courage for himself to meet the trials and the battles of the day victoriously. But he had never again encountered the pray-er there; he was always too late, he learned after meeting Daniel.

The meeting itself was a self-imposed one; he was the one doing the searching. On a campus with many thousands of students, this was no easy task. Add to this the fact that he had seen the pray-er only briefly and it complicated matters. He did remember, however, that his quarry was a tall, angular young man with sandy colored hair. But here, too, there were dead ends: many young men were tall and had sandy colored hair.

He had finally given up on the idea of searching out the man. Then one day, many months later, while changing classes and walking from the building to another far distant one for his next class, a young man fell in step with him and began conversing with him, asking him what his college major was, and such like things.

Gregory thought nothing of it until the man finally said, "Do you know the Lord Jesus? Is He living in your heart in saving grace?"

Again the queer feeling stirred in his breast. "I . . . I'm sorry; I . . . I guess I don't know what you're talking about," he had replied truthfully and candidly, looking the man in the face and noticing immediately the sandy colored hair and the tall form before him. The pray-er! It was he! One and the same! He had ceased his search but God had brought the man to him. Or was it God? If not, who? And why? For what purpose or intent? The questions fairly flooded his thinking. But wait, the man was speaking again. What grace flowed from his lips!

"Do you remember hearing how Jesus died upon the cross?" the pray-er asked kindly, adding, "That supreme sacrifice of self was for you. For me. For our sins." Then followed scripture verses like Gregory had never heard before. He was moved to tears. The strange feeling in his heart increased and became more intense than ever.

"Jesus loves you," the praying man had added. "He wants to live in your heart. Will you invite Him in, please?"

Without hesitation, Gregory remembered having answered quickly, "Yes. What must I do?"

And there on campus, beneath two large maple trees, the praying man had prayed for him while he, in his stumbling, halting way, uttered his very first prayer ever, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner and come into my heart. Save me. Forgive me for all my sins. . . ."

He hadn't been versed in church language so didn't know how to express what had taken place in his heart in any way other than to cry out joyfully, "I feel washed. From the inside out, washed! Clean! Like an old dirty car going through a car wash and coming out clean. Yes, I'm clean! Why... why, kind sir, I'm saved! Yes, that's what happened; I got saved! Now I know

Jesus: Oh, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! You are the pray-er. Thank you, good sir, for caring enough about my soul to speak to me about Jesus."

And then it was that he, Gregory, had told the man how he had listened to him praying that particular day and how strangely his heart had felt and been stirred. He learned the man's name was Daniel Kingsley, born and reared in a Christian home in a far distant state. They met daily for prayer together at the secluded hideaway and soon had more than half a dozen others joining them there, all new converts.

And now, here he was, sitting in the room they shared together this second year of college waiting to go "home" with his kind friend for Christmas.

Tears sprang to his eyes, filling them to the overflowing point. He had never known the joys nor the solidarity of a home life with kind, loving, and understanding parents. Never. His mother, whomever she may have been, had left him on the doorstep of an orphanage when he was an infant, he had learned from one of the workers in the orphanage one day when he inquired how he happened to be there.

For days, after the revealing truth was known, he had cried and could eat but a very little bit. It had been a shattering blow to his preconceived thinking that his parents each must have been killed in some horrible accident and could not, therefore, come and get him. But such was not the case, as he had learned that day shortly after his fourteenth birthday had come and gone in its usual humdrum way.

The only thing special and different about birthdays at the overcrowded orphanage was the Happy Birthday song which Tilda, an old white-haired housekeeper, never forgot to sing to each and every child whom she knew was having a birthday. And always, she managed to have a few pennies or a nickel, depending upon financial circumstances in her poverty stricken home, which she slipped into the birthday child's palm with a hug and a kiss accompaniment.

Gregory got all choked up now, remembering Tilda. She was the only mother image he'd had or known. Oh, how dearly he loved her, and how deeply! It was because of Tilda and her influence that he was in college. "You're bound to make good, Gregory," she'd tell him when he showed her

his grade cards from school. "You have something inside your pretty little head that's just a begging to come out. Use it, my boy. Use it! Why, just you look at these grades; all A's but one, and that's a B+! I'm proud of you, my boy. Yes, I'm plumb downright proud of you. Someday you're going to be helping people yourself, see if I'm not right. Lots and lots of people. And . . . and maybe you'll be helping boys and girls who are hurting . . . like . . . you hurt, dear boy," she had said.

The usage of terms like "my boy" and "dear boy" had sent thrills of joy pulsating through his being then. Oh, how he remembered it all, still! Perhaps his mother didn't love him enough to want him, or to keep him, but here was a housekeeper who did. She may not have borne him but her love was true, pure, unselfish, generous, pride-filled mother love just the same. And always, when he felt his rejection the keenest and the deepest, it seemed Tilda gave him an extra warm pat on the head or spoke the right words which chased the painful feeling and the hurt right out of his heart.

He remembered how he loved to be around her. It was quite common and ordinary for him to help her with the dusting and scrubbing. Work was pleasure because he was near her and her kind mother heart and, always, she spoke kindly and lovingly to him. And to all the other children, too. He couldn't remember her ever being impatient or nasty with anyone. Never.

She was the embodiment of love and the image of a mother to not only himself but to many of the other homeless orphans as well. How many others, besides himself, did she inspire and encourage and influence to go on to leave their mark in a noteworthy fashion and manner in the world? he wondered seriously now.

He wished, suddenly, that he would have kept in closer contact with his "brothers and sisters" from the orphanage. It would be interesting to know where each was and what they were doing as full grown adults, he thought, as he heard Daniel coming down the hallway, whistling a hymn, as usual.

He hurried to the door just as Daniel's cheery, "You ready to go?" greeted him.

"It still seems totally unreal," Gregory declared. "But I'm ready. And I'll have to admit that I feel as excited as a small child receiving his very first toy. This is a first for me, you will remember. And, Daniel, are you sure your

family won't mind? I'd certainly hate to spoil their time with you. I still think you should have written them and asked them if it was all right for you to bring me or not."

"Hey Greg, have I ever told you an untruth?"

"Oh, no. Never."

"Then trust me, when I tell you..., again..., that you'll be only too welcome to go to the Kingsley household for this blessed season. I told Mother and Dad on the phone that I'd be bringing one, possibly two or three fellows, home with me, and they were as happy as I about being able to do this. Chuck finally decided to go to an aunt's home for Christmas, and Troy and Marvin left for their parents' homes less than an hour ago. So that leaves only you and me to enjoy the Kingsley family's wonderfully rich and real hospitality. I'll be ready to leave in a jiffy, God willing. As soon as I shed these work clothes, shower and get into traveling garb, we'll be on our way. By the way, is your boss going to let you off work until after the New Year?"

"He is," Gregory replied. "And that's a real answer to prayer. He even gave me a small bonus; a gift, he said. I could scarcely believe it. When I thanked him and said, 'God bless you, Mr. Katz,' tears sparkled in his eyes. I believe he's getting closer and closer to believing that Jesus is his Messiah. Well, I'll load the luggage in the car while you shower. . . ."

"Thanks, Gregory. We'll leave as soon as we possibly can; but not until we pray together. In all things, honoring Christ, and talking everything over with Him. Amen?"

"A big Amen, Daniel," and, picking up the two pieces of luggage, one piece for each of them, Gregory hurried from the room.

Chapter 2

The car sped into the night, away from the sunny climate and on toward the north. Gregory took the first turn at sleeping in the back seat of the car while Daniel did the driving. He thought sleep would elude him, due to his excitement and pure joy over getting to spend Christmas in a real family home; but such was not the case: shortly after fluffing his pillow up and

curling his long legs into as comfortable a position as was possible on the seat, he fell asleep with a prayer on his lips and praise in his heart.

He awoke some hours later and sat on the edge of the seat, wondering why Daniel was going so slowly. In a moment he knew. Sleet! And ice, too. He was now wide awake.

"This is another first for me," he said to Daniel. "I've never actually been in a sleet storm."

"Really, Greg?"

"Truthfully so. Whew! It's bad out there, isn't it, Dan?"

"Tracherous. But by God's help, and with care, we'll make it. We'll just not make as good time as I had hoped we would. But we can expect weather like this where I come from. Our winters get pretty harsh sometimes. Did you ever see snow?"

"Never."

"Then you're in for some excitement and fun, God willing. We go ice skating and tobogganing as a family, and Dad always takes us bobsledding sometime between Christmas and New Year. These are very special family events for us. So long as I can remember, we have done these things together."

"Does your mother participate, Dan?"

"Does she ever! Why Gregory, sometimes Dad feels like Mother enjoys it most of all. The ice skating is done at night, usually, when we can enjoy a big, welcomely-warm bonfire and roast hot dogs and toast marshmallows. Dad always figured that a family who prayed and played together was more apt to stay together than one who did neither."

Gregory was silent for a long while, wondering if his mother would have done things like Daniel's mother, had she kept him and raised him and not left him on an orphanage step. Then a new thought crossed his mind and a sudden wave of respect washed over him for the woman who had given him life but whom he never knew. He had never thought of it before. The thought

brought a warm feeling of love to him for his mother, whoever she was and wherever she was: she must have loved him enough so that she desired life for him rather than an abortion slaughterhouse. Too, she may have been so destitute as to have been forced to give him to the orphanage, knowing that, there, he would be nourished and kept alive.

The thoughts filled Gregory with a tenderness and a warm glow for the unknown woman who had given birth and life to him, something he had never experienced before. And with these new feelings, the thought of rejection vanished and left him. At last, after all these many years, he knew he was free from the things that had haunted him. It was gone. Forever!

He felt like shouting. Oh, God was so good to him. He had saved his soul and, shortly afterward, He had purged out the old carnal sin nature, sanctifying him wholly, and now He had removed the dreaded feeling of having been rejected. Blessed be God forever! Every day, he was learning something new about the Savior under Whose wings he had come to trust and to abide. It was gloriously wonderful. The Lord seemed to take great pleasure, and make it His special delight, to do these great favors for him. Blessings, they were. Yes, without a doubt, they were blessings. Every one of them. Gifts, given by God Himself to His children.

Again his mind raced quickly to Tilda. God was so much like the housekeeper, he thought. Or, perhaps, he should say that she was so much like God. Each time he did something that pleased her, or made her proud of him, she rewarded him with a gentle, loving pat on the head or a quick hug. And now God was "rewarding" him, too, it seemed, for walking in each and every ray of light which was shed upon his pathway as he daily read the Word and took time to wait upon Him in prayer. "As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to your former lusts in your ignorance:

"But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation . . ." (I Peter 1:14-15).

Without a doubt, there were earthly rewards for the righteous just as surely as the wicked received his "just desserts," in a measure, in this life. The final great pay day, however, was when God's Voice would make the solemn, irreversible pronouncement, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). But what

joy and rapture for the pure and the upright in heart to hear, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, enter into the joys of thy Lord."

He was so deeply engrossed with thinking about the Word that he didn't notice the flashing light ahead until Daniel very, very carefully eased the car to the side of the road and stopped. An accident! It looked like a bad one; three cars were involved.

"Watch your step," Daniel cautioned as, simultaneously each opened his door and stepped outside. "This ice can send you spinning. And falling, Greg. So be careful. I sure wish I had some boots. We have plenty of them at home, but none here. And we need them now."

"But you don't need them in a place where ice is an unheard of thing," Gregory reminded Daniel as they made their way slowly and carefully toward the scene of the accident.

The police, who had arrived before Gregory and Daniel, motioned them away, wanting only the paramedics to handle the victims and to have a sufficient amount of room, free from crowded onlookers, to work with those injured. They stood for a while, watching and praying, then walked back to the car and waited until the highway was cleared and they could move on.

"I'd offer to drive, Daniel, but I've never driven on ice. So what do you think?" Gregory asked.

"I'll drive," Daniel answered. "You pray. We may get out of this after awhile. My heart aches for those accident victims. Going home for Christmas, no doubt. And no doubt happy, until that patch of ice wreaked havoc. Life is so uncertain, isn't it?"

"How very true! And I wonder if any of those people were prepared to meet God."

The incident had an extremely sobering effect upon the two and they traveled in silence for a long while, praying and meditating, thankful to God for protecting them.

They made few stops, and by late nightfall the following day they pulled into the little lane leading to the Kingsleys' home, tired and fatigued but praising God for the safe trip.

Daniel saw a light come on in the living room and knew his father and mother were waiting to welcome him home. What wonderful parents he had! he thought, as he stepped up on the porch just as the warm glow of the outside lamp came on.

"My boy! My boy! You're home -- safe! Thank God!" his father cried happily, tears shining in his eyes, as he rushed to meet Daniel.

"O Daniel, we are so happy to see you again!" his mother exclaimed, flinging her arms around his neck and kissing him tenderly on his stubbly cheek. "And this must be one of your good, spiritual friends. Oh, we are so happy to have you," she added, smiling up at Gregory.

"Father, Mother, this is Gregory. Gregory Brownstone. Greg, meet the most wonderful parents in the world -- mine."

"It is my pleasure, indeed!" Gregory remarked. "This seems almost unreal. I have looked forward to this moment ever since Daniel asked me to come with him."

"We are delighted to have you with us," Mr. Kingsley said, giving Gregory a warm slap on his shoulder. "And all we ask is that you relax and make yourself at home here. You are part of our family for this blessed and sacred season of the year and, unlike the innkeeper at Bethlehem who had no room for Jesus, our house is always open to any and all of our children's friends. May you sense the true and wonderful meaning of Christmas while you abide under our roof."

"Oh, I will! I know I will. Already I sense that Christ is the Head of this home."

"I have a stew waiting for you," Mrs. Kingsley said, stepping between the two young men. "I'm sure you are hungry; Daniel doesn't stop like he should when he begins the journey home," she teased. "And what a fine stubble of beard you have grown, my boy! No time taken out, even, to have a smoothly-shaven face for a mother to kiss."

"I guess we do look pretty much like a couple of tramps," Daniel declared, running his hand across his face and over his chin where the stubbly growth was quite heavy. "But if you can put up with us until after our stomachs are full of your delicious stew, I promise to take care of my tramp-like looking appearance. And I know Greg will do the same."

"Forget about your appearance until after you have had some sleep," Mr. Kingsley said, breaking into the pleasant banter as he took each young man by the arm and led them into the kitchen.

The parents were always happiest when all their children were home and now that Daniel was in, safe and sound and seated with Gregory, around the table, the mother and father were overjoyed. They had slept little, watching for the lights down the lane heralding Daniel's coming. But little matter, that; Daniel was now home: the children were all "in the nest" once more. This was enough to make up for what sleep was lost. Furthermore, their sleep, what was left of the far-advanced night, would be all the better and the sounder knowing that, for the next few weeks, they would be a complete and whole family again.

Mr. Kingsley squeezed his wife's hand tenderly; she smiled up at her husband. And Gregory missed none of this little show of affection which passed between husband and wife; father and mother. Tears sprang to his eyes. Was his mother, somewhere, being loved by a good man like Daniel's father? he wondered. Was she? Oh, he hoped she was!

When Gregory awoke some hours later, he looked over at the empty twin bed and knew that Daniel must, no doubt, be downstairs with his parents. How wonderful to have a family! he thought, getting out of bed quickly and heading for the bathroom to shower. He and Dan did, indeed, look travel weary upon their arrival home and now, how good and refreshing and reviving his morning shower and shave would feel!

It was after he had made his bed and had his private devotions that he made his way down the hallway toward the stairs. A window at the end of the hallway lured and bade him to its view; he could not resist. Pale yellow beams of sunlight filtered invitingly and cheerfully through the shimmering folds of creamy-white curtains, overhung by matching, full-ruffled priscillas. Home! The entire effect seemed to whisper the cherished word to his home-

bereft but ever-longing soul. How fortunate and blest were Daniel, and his brothers and sisters! he soliloquized silently as tears sprang involuntarily to his eyes.

He parted the sheers and looked out through windows that sparkled and shone with cleanliness unto a world of such brilliance and glitter as to render him breathless momentarily. Snow! How brilliantly beautiful! How wondrously white! Like his heart, white. And pure and clean! And holy! Isaiah 1:18 sang itself over and over in rapturous melody and joyous harmony in his soul: ". . . though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

His sins, "as white as snow"! Through precious Blood; the Blood of Jesus Christ, his Lord and his Savior! O what infinite, marvelous and wondrous grace! What love!

He stood as one mesmerized, gazing at the dazzling white spectacle before him. For so far as he could see, everything was white and sparkling like trillions of tiny diamonds on the ermine-covered earth. After a long while he stepped from behind the parted curtains, made sure that they fell softly and neatly into their folds again, then he went downstairs. How very silent it was! he thought, as he started through the family room toward the kitchen, wondering where everyone was, Daniel especially.

(Chapter 3)

Gregory walked out through the dining room and stood for a while, looking around, and noticing all the many homespun crafts and decorations which gave the old but beautiful and well kept house a special charm. Everywhere he looked, he saw the magic of a woman's creativity and handiwork. The carefully crafted and tastefully-chosen works of art, all of elegant simplicity, were carried out throughout each room of the house that he had seen thus far. It gave a look of warmth and hominess to the place and fit in marvelously with the Early American decor, he thought. Nicer still was the aura of the rooms, which seemed to beckon and invite one to sit down and visit for a while.

He noticed the silence again and wondered where everyone was and why they were so quiet. It was, indeed, as still and as quiet as the proverbial church mouse.

He ventured timidly toward the kitchen door and stopped suddenly when a pleasantly-soft voice said, "Good morning. I'm Elizabeth Kingsley, Daniel's sister, and I presume you are one of the friends whom my brother was bringing home for this blessed time of the year. Welcome to our wonderful Christian home where love and good will abides. And abounds."

Gregory stood like one in shock, momentarily, so awestruck, amazed and overcome was he by the loveliness of the very-petite, sweetly-modest and pleasant young woman who sat at the kitchen table, Bible open before her, smiling up at him.

"I hope I didn't frighten you," she added, sensing his state of momentary speechlessness. "Forgive me, if I did."

"No. No," he replied quickly. "I'm grateful to hear a voice; the silence was a bit oppressive. And I'm truly pleased to meet you, Elizabeth. I am Gregory Brownstone, your brother's roommate this year."

"Glad to meet you, Gregory. Are the others up, and almost ready for breakfast, perhaps?" she asked, standing to her feet.

"Others? I . . . I have no idea where Daniel is. His bed is empty, and well made up. And as to your parents, I supposed that I was the very last person in this household to get up. Shame on me! It's extremely late," he added, chiding himself.

"I mean, the others from college; are they up, do you know?"

"Oh, I know what you mean. There are no others, Elizabeth: Daniel and I came alone. The other two who had thought they might come, decided, after all, to go home to their relatives."

"Well, in that case, I'll begin breakfast preparations for us. It appears as though the rest of the family has forsaken us. All, that is, except Chad, our thirteen-year-old brother who, just a short while ago, bounced into this kitchen like a jumpy ball, hugged my neck, ate an enormous bowl of cereal, then took off for winter adventure somewhere here on Father's land. I tell you, that boy loves snow! And winter, in general. But it was so good to see that bit of fun-loving human dynamo that I didn't scold him for leaving me so

quickly after having just seen me for a few minutes. Do you like hot cakes, waffles, or just plain eggs and bacon with freshly sliced, fried potatoes?" she asked, donning a dainty little print apron and tying it quickly around her tiny waist.

"Whatever you prepare will be delicious, I am sure," Gregory answered, almost totally overcome by her natural charm and her way of putting him completely and totally at ease.

"How about buckwheat hotcakes with Father's pure maple syrup to pour over them, and a skillet of fried potatoes and some home cured sausages? Does it sound 'interesting' to the palate?"

"Extremely so," Gregory replied. "And, to be truthful with you, you're making me realize how very hungry I actually am. Here," he said, stepping over to the kitchen sink where Elizabeth had put potatoes for peeling, "let me display my skill and expertise with a common paring knife, please."

"Thanks much, Gregory. I'll make the hotcakes then and get the sausage to sizzling. Are you sure you don't mind?" she questioned softly, looking over at him.

"Mind? Indeed not!" Mind? he thought happily as he picked up a potato and began to peel. Never in all his life had he felt what he was feeling now. This was a home! A Christian home! And everything in it and about it exuded the breath and the atmosphere of Heaven. Tears of joy sprang to his eyes.

While he peeled, and as he listened to the gentle slap, slap, slap of Elizabeth's wooden spoon mixing the buckwheat cake batter together, something inside his manly frame stirred: he would have a home just like this someday, God helping him! Yes he would. And he would have a wife like Elizabeth!

With the last thought, Gregory felt his cheeks burn hot with embarrassment. He must be careful here. Hadn't he turned all of his life, including that of his life's companion, over to God! Indeed he had. And God's decision and His choice was still the only thing he cared about and was interested in.

He wondered, suddenly, why Daniel had never told him how old Elizabeth was. Always he had thought she was a mere child. But, then, they had never discussed such a trivial thing as age. He had known that Daniel had a brother and a sister, but that was all. Daniel always spoke endearingly and affectionately about each member of his family, with no mention of age, however. Could it be that Elizabeth already had a good Christian male friend and was, even now, perhaps engaged to be married? he wondered.

The mere thought of her being engaged made him feel sick somewhere in the pit of his stomach. He felt ashamed of himself for feeling this way. Why, he had only just met her; and he wanted God's will for his life in this extremely important decision. Only God's will! And what if this was God's will!

The thought jolted Gregory. He hadn't thought of it before. He must forget it and, somewhere, he must find a secluded spot, away from everybody and everything that would hinder and distract him, and he must pray. He dare not allow his head nor his heart to lead him away from what God had planned for him. Never!

"You mentioned about Chad only having seen you for a few minutes," Gregory said, trying to forget his thoughts of a few moments ago. "Do you work away from home? Or... or was it just a general statement, meaning that he didn't see you but a few minutes this morning?" he asked.

Elizabeth turned the gently sizzling sausages and sliced the potatoes into hot bacon grease then turned quickly to Gregory. "Do you mean that my big, wonderful brother hasn't told you that I'm attending a Bible School?" she questioned, laughing softly.

"That's right; your 'big, wonderful brother' didn't inform me of this. Is it far from here?" Gregory wondered.

"Close to a thousand miles away. I got home sometime before Daniel and you and, after hours of visiting with Mother and Daddy, I finally went to bed, totally exhausted. I had to wait to come home until several of my friends could get off work, then we all came together. We ran into quite a lot of bad weather. I suppose you did, too."

"Ice and sleet," Gregory said. "Extremely treacherous. We saw a three-car accident, which held us up for some time. I only pray those poor victims were ready to meet God."

"God was good to us," Elizabeth affirmed. "I'm sure you're wondering where Daniel is. I forgot to tell you. My Aunt Miriam had a bad fall this morning, so Mother's quickly-written note stated, and Daniel went with Father and Mother to the hospital. Aunt Miriam's very special to us: she led my parents to the Lord many, many years ago. She's my father's oldest sister and she's a real saint, if ever I've seen and known one. At her age, this fall could be disastrous or, worse still, fatal."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear this," Gregory stated with real feeling.

"I only wish I could be with her. But I wouldn't think of driving Daddy's old car. I'm a pro at not knowing how to shift gears," Elizabeth said with a soft, bubbly laugh. "Even my best friends won't ride with me when I take Father's old car. They say it's similar to riding a bucking bronco. But maybe they're stretching it a mite. It is dreadfully jerky and bumpy riding, however, when I go to shifting gears. I just never have learned how to shift smoothly," she confessed on herself.

"The automatic drive is so much easier for a woman," Gregory said consolingly. "Would you want to go to the hospital?" he asked. "I'll take you, if you want to go. My car, at college, is a stick shift, so we should make the drive without any trouble. I mean, I'm used to this kind of shift."

Elizabeth's eyes brightened. "Oh, would you, please? I want to go. I love Aunt Miriam. Would this be an imposition upon you?" she asked seriously. "I wouldn't do this for anything. So if it is, please say so. I won't feel one bit badly. Around here, we're open and frank with each other. So. . . ."

"It would be a pleasure to drive you there, Elizabeth. And in no way would it be an imposition. But what about your brother? He's hardly old enough to stay alone. I . . . I don't mean to imply that your brother isn't trustworthy. But if God ever blesses me with children I doubt I'd ever allow a thirteen-year-old of mine to stay alone for too long a period of time. I saw firsthand, in the orphanage, what can happen when and if twelve and

thirteen-year-olds don't have proper supervision. Chad is different from those boys, I'm sure. But nights can be scary when one is alone."

"Orphanage? Were you in an orphanage, Gregory?" Elizabeth asked, as she dished the sausages and potatoes up for serving.

"All my life. But here, let me help you with that food," he said, quickly changing the subject.

"Thank you, Gregory. And, no, I had no thought of leaving Chad alone. My parents would disapprove strongly. Chad's not the biggest hospital fan, however; so if the Johnsons don't mind, we may take him over there. They're wonderful Christians, and Chad and their Thomas are good friends. If we can find Chad, that is," Elizabeth added with a smile.

It was while they were clearing the table and washing the dishes that they heard the stomping of Chad's feet on the back porch, trying to clear his boots of their accumulation of snow and ice. "I'm starved, Elizabeth!" he announced, coming into the kitchen, his cheeks and nose looking red like a cherry.

"Good, Chad!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "There are sausages, fried potatoes and buckwheat cakes left, just waiting to be eaten. But first, boots must go out on the enclosed back porch. That's a standard rule around here, remember? And before you go out to obey said rule, I want you to meet our very special guest, Gregory Brownstone."

Chad sized Gregory up from head to toe, then he said, "I'm sure glad to meet you, Gregory. And I'm glad you're here. Maybe, now, Thomas Johnson and I can have a real snowball battle at our snow fort with Daniel and you. I never felt it was quite fair, Thomas and me against Daniel."

"I've never been in snow before, Chad, but that sounds like it's going to be an exciting game."

"You've never been in snow?" Chad asked. "You don't know what you've missed, Gregory."

"Hurry, dear," Elizabeth urged gently. "Aunt Miriam's in the hospital. Would you like to go, Chad? Mother and Father and Daniel are there with her

and, God willing, Gregory's going to take me over. Do you want to ride along?"

"Aw Sis, you know how queasy my stomach gets in a hospital! Thanks, no. Or, if I go, I'll just stay inside the car. I can't stand a hospital."

"OK. Would you rather spend that time over at the Johnsons, Chad? We'd pick you up on the way home, the Lord willing."

"I'd like to be near Aunt Miriam, Sis, but I guess I'd better go over to the Johnsons. At least my stomach doesn't misbehave over there and cause me embarrassment like it does in a hospital," the boy declared seriously, taking his boots to the porch.

An hour later, Gregory and Elizabeth were on their way to the hospital, having dropped Chad off at the Johnson farm.

(Chapter 4)

The sun, a brilliant, almost glaring orb against the stark, glittering whiteness of the snow, rode high in a cloudless sky by the time they reached the hospital. Elizabeth was overwhelmed with joy and thankfulness to find her aunt's condition was listed as satisfactory. Doctor's orders were for her to have plenty of rest with visitors' visiting time limited to one half hour, not more.

"I'll be home for Christmas, the Lord willing, won't I?" Aunt Miriam asked her niece.

"I can't say, Auntie dear. But don't you worry about such things. We want you getting well and strong again," Elizabeth soothed. "And even if you can't come home by then, we'll be here to carol for you and to love you and pray with you."

"It won't be quite the same though as being at your house, Elizabeth. But little matter; I have the abiding presence of the One who is the reason for Christmas with me constantly in my heart." Then, looking at Gregory, she said, "And you, young man, you must take good care of my niece. She's a very wonderful person; totally unlike most of the women of her generation. She'll make a good wife and. . . ."

"Auntie," Elizabeth interrupted softly and kindly, "Gregory is Daniel's roommate. . . ."

"I know. I know, my dear Elizabeth. But I have been praying for you for many years; praying about your mate. God has revealed to me that I would live long enough to see the one whom He has kept for you. Today, this moment, He has fulfilled this promise to me. The young man from the east is not the one, Elizabeth. He's not the one."

"I know, Aunt Miriam. I know," Elizabeth cried. "And months ago, I told him I couldn't get clear on our dating."

"Thank God! Thank God!" Aunt Miriam exclaimed, her pain-filled eyes shining. "I prayed about that. Oh, how I prayed!" Then, turning her shining eyes to Gregory, she said, "You are a good man; a holy man. You will be kind and good to Elizabeth. Together, you will reap a great harvest of souls on soil other than your native soft. Your life together will be a happy, much-fulfilled life, sprinkled generously, of course, with the heartaches and sorrows and troubles which, inevitably, come to each of us as we sojourn through this land.

"We are pilgrims and strangers here; keep this fact ever before you. Never allow the world to press or squeeze you into its mold. He will keep you to your journey's end. Always put Him first and foremost in your life and you will be one of the happiest couples on earth. Now Gregory, my son, take Elizabeth's hand while I pray for both of you. My strength is waning, and I want the privilege of praying the first prayer of blessing upon you and my wonderful niece."

Gregory lifted his tear-filled eyes and met those of Elizabeth, wet with falling tears. They looked at each other for a moment, then, tenderly, Elizabeth placed her hand in Gregory's steady, strong, supportive one. And before Aunt Miriam began praying even, Gregory's fears and doubts were all gone. God had prepared him a bride, chaste, pure, and clean, and her name was Elizabeth.

Lying upon her bed while pillows protected her limbs from jolts and jars, her face shining like an angel, the white-haired, tiny piece of frail humanity laid her hands, one upon Gregory, the other upon Elizabeth, and began to

pray, invoking a special blessing upon each and, when she had finished, Gregory, on an impulse which he could not restrain, leaned over and wrapped his arms around her while his tears wet her cheeks. "Thank you... Mother," he said.

"My boy, you are a good man," Aunt Miriam remarked again. "And you may call me Mother anytime you care to do so. The God under whose wings you have come to trust has kept you to this hour, an orphan though you may have been."

"Did Daniel tell you?" Gregory asked, straightening up and drying his tears at the same time.

"Before Daniel told me, what scanty fragments he was able to piece together by your carefulness of talk and few words, I felt Elizabeth's husband was going to be a man who knew poverty and upon whom life had dealt some rather hard blows. So you see, I was not surprised when Daniel informed me that his God-sent roommate was reared, all of his life, in an orphanage and that, by hard work and much deprivation, he was working his way through school, preparing himself for missionary work as a doctor.

"My dear boy," Aunt Miriam continued, "it takes the storms to test the true worth and quality of the tree; to make the tree, really. God allowed you to suffer, and to bear the hardships and the deprivation of a mother so that you could better minister, in tender love and care, with pity and feeling and compassion, to those whom He is sending you to. You will be not only equipped by God for service, but you will be qualified, as well. You have borne your troubles and trials and hardships like a true soldier of the cross of Jesus Christ. One of the Old Testament writers stated it succinctly when he declared, 'I sat where they sat.' So, my dear boy, you 'sat' where those others, like you, 'sat.' You know the tears and the heartaches, the sorrows and the heartbreaks. And all the time, that which seemed like an ill wind or a sad misfortune and unfortunate happening, was meant for your good, working together for the good of the calling wherein Christ has called you."

Gregory shouted a soft Hallelujah heavenward. Everything this tiny little woman-saint had uttered was true. Her insight into things spiritual was keen and clear and sharp. He felt like he was among a prophetess, which indeed he was. Her very presence exuded the essence of the Divine. She lived God. She talked God. She was like Him.

"Now run along, my dears," Aunt Miriam said, smiling up into their faces. "I'm getting tired, and I do mean to get well so I can attend your wedding. Oh, not right away. Don't think I'm rushing ahead of God, I'm not. Elizabeth, you have another year or so till your nurse's training is complete; and you, my boy, are still studying. Go in peace; the Lord your God is among you. He will bless your study and your preparation and in due time He will bless your combined labors abundantly. God bless you. Now I will have to rest.

"Elizabeth, your parents and your brother left only a short while before you arrived, in case you have been wondering where they are. Daniel touched God for me when he prayed. Why children, I tell you, we had camp meeting right here in my room. My soul was so blest, and my cup of joy flowed until it spilled over. And seeing you, my dear, dear Gregory, has well nigh caused it to overflow again. Everything that God promises does come to pass. In His time and His way! He works circumstances around and about so as to bring things to pass. Bless His wonderful name!"

"Don't you think it's time for rest?" a smiling, white-capped nurse asked her patient as she breezed through the open doorway and stood looking down into the sweet face of Aunt Miriam.

"Indeed I do, my dear nurse. And now, if my beloved Elizabeth and Gregory will excuse me, I'll take a nap. Come back to see me, children," she said, closing her eyes.

Elizabeth bent over the railing of the bed and kissed the head and the cheek of her aunt, exclaiming sincerely, "Oh Auntie dear, I love you so. Thanks for all your fervent prayers for me. I appreciate them . . . so much."

"And that makes two of us," Gregory added, leaning over the bed rail to kiss the other cheek. "We'll be back, dear," he promised. "The Lord willing, we'll be back," and taking Elizabeth by the arm, they left the room.

"Are you in a hurry?" Gregory asked, after he had helped Elizabeth into the car.

"No. Why? Would you like to go shopping, Gregory?" she asked, remembering that there were a few things she wanted to buy before too many more days.

"I'd love to go. But, first, may I tell you something; something which I feel we should settle between us before we get back to the house?"

"Of course, Gregory. What is it?"

"I love you, Elizabeth. This sounds ridiculously unreal but it's the truth. Every bit of it. When I first saw you in the kitchen this morning, my heart did strange, new things to me. Rather than moving out of the realm of the will of God, I purposed to find a solitary place and there wait upon God, seeking to know His will and His response about it. But as surely as I am speaking to you now, so surely did God give me the calm and sweet assurance, while Aunt Miriam was saying all she did about us, that you are God's choice for me. My questions and doubts are gone; every single one of them, gone. How do you feel about God's will in the matter, my dear Elizabeth? I must know."

With tears of happiness shining in her eyes, Elizabeth said, "I can answer you with one word, Gregory . . . clear. I too, felt God, sanction upon everything Auntie was saying. And, like you, every single doubt took flight there in the hospital room. When she asked you to take my hand while she prayed the first prayer of blessing over us, I knew in that moment that, until death parted us, I wanted always to have my hand in yours; to walk the road of life with none other but you, and to share happinesses, joys and blessings, as well as sorrows and heartaches and trials, with no one but you, Gregory. I love you. With God's help, and with each of us pulling together, we can do exploits for God. This is my answer to your question."

Gregory looked at Elizabeth. Then he exclaimed softly, "You have made me very happy, my dear Elizabeth. My cup of joy is at the overflowing point. Thank you, thank you. By God's grace and help I shall always be loyal, true, and loving and kind to you. Again, I love you. Very deeply. And now, if you will tell me where you want to go, we shall shop. Together. Then, as a sort of celebration, we'll find a nice, clean restaurant and take our evening meal there, God willing. Together," he remarked softly as he headed the car out of the parking lot.

He had come as a Christmas guest and God had had other plans for him all the time. One day, in the not too distant future, God willing, he would become a member of this wonderful family, he would no longer be a mere guest. Tears filled his eyes. He lifted his thankful heart in praises to God.

The End