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NEW YEAR'S EVE EXPERIENCE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

The night was dark; so dark, in fact, that the man could see very little as he walked. Not only was it dark but it was bitterly cold and the driving, blinding, freezing rain was making walking hazardous. The wind coming in off the lake had no compassion for those who were not sheltered or protected from its sporadic gales and its biting, penetrating cold. None at all: it was

merciless. Fierce, even; much like a monster, out to knock down, trample under, and devour its victim.

The man pulled at the collar of his coat, trying vainly to properly protect his neck from the elements that pummeled him from every side. Had he come in vain? he wondered. After all, he could see almost nothing and by all standards of observation the streets were deserted. And rightly so: the night was not fit for either man or beast to venture out into it.

He walked on by habit, knowing the streets and the buildings which he was passing as if it were broad daylight. One did not live in a neighborhood for so long as he did, and had, without becoming cognizant of its buildings and its inhabitants. Especially so when the mission in its midst was the only lighthouse for miles around. Had he not stayed on when the going was rough and when life-threatening circumstances knocked daily at his door, he might not be here this night, roaming the streets for whom, he knew not, nor for why. He knew only that he had been compelled by some inner force to get up from his warm bed and take to the streets, leaving his faithful and God-fearing companion to the protection of the Almighty, under whose shadow she had come to trust when in her early teens.

Praying silently for guidance, he walked on, turning first one corner then another; knowing suddenly that each step was bringing him closer to the lake and the long bridge that spanned it.

A sudden gust of wind, of such force as to nearly knock him down, left him breathless for a moment. He turned about-face, coughed, collected his senses and regained his breath then started for the bridge.

It was an eerie feeling, seeing neither light nor cars on the bridge. Ordinarily, the bridge held a steady stream of comers and goers. Plus, the lights along the bridge itself chased the darkness away from the steel girders and its many tall spans. Where were the lights tonight? he wondered. And why weren't they shining?

He stepped onto the walkway that led across the bridge, slipping and sliding every now and then but holding on to the steel rafting that served as a guardrail. He should have brought his flashlight, he mused in silence as he buried his face deeply into the upturned folds of the coat collar and walked on into the pelting, freezing rain.

The wind had picked up in velocity. It whistled, whined and moaned in the steel girders above him, sending chills racing up and down the length of his spine. Had there been an accident that cut off the lights along the bridge? No doubt there had been; it had happened before, he remembered. Or perhaps the ice had taken down the power lines. It froze more rapidly and more solidly on bridges than it did inland in the same amount of time, he knew.

Thinking he heard something -- whatever it was, or even might have been, he had no idea -- he paused, listening intently, straining to hear. He tried to look ahead, but everything was a blur of darkness, made even more so by the sheets of driving, impenetrable freezing rain.

Feeling the frigid air steal through his too-thin top coat like a thief, he once more huddled down into the folds of the upturned collar and pushed ahead, making little progress against the velocity of the wind, which seemed to be pushing him backward two or three steps to every one he took forward.

He prayed. Why was he here? What had brought him out in a night like this? he wondered again. Perhaps it was just his imagination this time that had awakened him from a sound sleep beneath warm covers and prodded him to leave the room and to go out to the streets. Could it have been? he wondered, as a gale-force wind swept over the bridge and nearly knocked him to his knees.

Staggering against the wint'ry blast and holding on to the guard rail which separated him from the murky waters below, he regained his strength and, tediously and slowly, he started on again, confident that the prodding was not of his making nor even of his imagination. Whatever the reason, he would obey his Master, who never wasted anyone's time on trifles.

A sudden scream, somewhere directly in front of him pierced the eerie night like a wailing siren. He stopped in his tracks, listening.

"No! No! I won't do it!" the woman screamed.

"You will either obey or be drowned. Do you hear?"

"I won't do it. I can't. I can't. It's wicked. It's evil. It's damning souls. You've pushed me as far as I'll go. I won't do it. I won't!"

"So you won't sell for us, eh? Well, we'll see to that. Tonight is your last chance; either you obey the drug cartel or I must drown you."

"I won't do it! I won't, I tell you."

"You signed your own death sentence. . . ."

Again the scream pierced through the searching, howling wind.

"Scream your lungs out; no one will hear you on a night like this. Furthermore, no one is brave enough to venture out tonight. Even the ice storm is working in my favor; no telling when they'll have those broken lines taken care of. . . ."

The man prayed. How he prayed for wisdom and for strength. With visibility nil, he didn't know how to approach the woman's abductor.

"Help, Lord! Help!" he whispered into the moaning wind.

And just then the abductor spoke again. He was directly in front of the man.

"So, you're quite a little tiger for strength," the abductor said. "But I'll soon have you over the guard rail; then display your strength down there in those churning, foaming waters." He laughed hideously as he finished speaking.

"Halt!" cried the man from the bridge. It was an order. A command, spoken with the voice of authority. And the same instant he had grabbed the woman's abductor from behind and pinned him face down on the walkway of the bridge. He hadn't learned those holds for nothing years ago when he served his country in one of its wars. They still came in handy now and then. Yes, they did.

"Let me go! Let me go!" cried the abductor. "You're hurting me. who are you, anyway?"

"The Lord's messenger-servant. Young lady," he called into the darkness, "I will get you to safety and to a shelter. Come near, and have no fear; you can trust me. I will protect you from this vile man."

"Let me go!" came the anguished scream from the cold concrete walkway floor.

"You will be coming with me, too," he told the captive as he raised him to his feet. "And you better not try to get away. The hold you just experienced is mild compared to a few others I know."

"Turn loose of me! Please! Please!" came the anguished cry.

"No way. Now, walk beside me; this is an order. The grip will tighten if you try to free yourself. And young lady, take hold of my left coat sleeve and don't let go of it. You have nothing to fear: I stand between you and this murderous man. This man, who was created in the image of God but who turned his life over to the devil to work all manner of sin and wickedness and evil. God's Word decrees that, 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.' Only, death is not the end: It is merely the beginning -- of an eternal existence in the lake of fire, where there will be 'weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth,' and 'where the fire is not quenched and their worm dieth not.'"

The young woman was trembling; she sobbed for thankfulness over being delivered from the watery grave and saved from her abductor/tormentor.

The walk back was made in haste and, strange as it seemed to the man, he didn't mind the cold nearly so much as he had previously. True, the wind was at his back, pushing him, shoving him. But the knowledge that he had been God's servant at rescuing a young woman from a watery grave as well as from hell, made him feel warm through and through.

Numerous times, the young man had tried to fool him and break free of him, and each time he had tightened the hold, almost dropping the abductor to the ground several times. It produced the necessary results, however, and the rest of the journey to the mission was made in peace.

Once inside the door of the mission house the man called up the stairs, never slackening his grip on the young man's wrists, which were pinned securely behind his back by the man's hold.

"Call the police," he said softly to his wife. "Tell them to come over immediately. And, dear, please take care of the girl."

For the first time, the man looked at the two whom he had brought into the mission. The young woman was, indeed, little more than a girl. She was shaking and trembling with cold. She was pretty but so very thin. She looked like a frightened animal, he thought.

"I . . . I . . . don't know . . . how . . . to . . . to thank you!" she cried, falling on the warm floor in front of her savior.

The man smiled down at her. "You have the Lord Jesus Christ to thank," he said kindly. "I am merely His servant; His errand boy, doing what He tells me to do and going where and when He tells me to go. Tonight He sent me out into the night to rescue you. You owe your life to Him."

The police walked in then. Immediately they handcuffed the young man. Then began the questioning: first the young woman; then the young man, who remained obdurate and churlish. And not until the handcuffed man was taken to jail by the police did the girl open her heart and tell her story; the oft-repeated story of a young woman going to the city to work, only to find the salary inadequate to pay for a decent apartment in a sensible neighborhood. Then the "chance" (??) meeting of a (seemingly nice) young man who knew where there was a good-paying job, et cetera, et cetera. And suddenly, and too late, she discovered she was in a brothel and a den of drugs and every sin and vice known to man. Her refusal to become a drug pusher had led to her near death.

"God has given you a reprieve," the kind wife said sweetly. "What are you going to do with it?"

Sobbing like a brokenhearted child, the young woman fell to the floor on her knees in front of the sweet, motherly woman who had given her warm, dry clothing to put on as soon as she could shower. "I want Jesus," she confessed. "I need Jesus. I'm a backslider. I want to come Home tonight."

'The way of transgressors is hard,'" she declared as she began to repent and pray.

It was late when the man and his wife crawled back into bed for a few more hours of sleep before the dawn of a brand new year would challenge them with its prospects of rescuing the perishing and caring for the dying. Seeing the return of another prodigal, this time, a young woman, made the expenditure of each and every effort more than worthwhile.

Wrapped in the warmth of the blankets now and blest beyond measure over the conversion of the one rescued, the man fell into a deeply restful and body-building sleep, thankful to God that another soul had a new start and a brand new beginning in Christ at the birth of another New Year.