The Freak Storm

By Mrs. Paul E. King

Grace Marie Collins peered anxiously over the steering wheel into the dusk of an unnaturally early evening. The snow was blowing in deeper and heavier with every passing minute, making driving more and more hazardous and tedious and slow. The northeast wind was rising. It shrieked and moaned around her with a sickening, melancholy sound, rocking the small car furiously.
She turned her headlights on but it only added to her confusion and frustration as it made the rapidly-falling snow dance weirdly all about her. She felt ill and dizzy watching it.

Where were the snowplows? she wondered; and why were they not out clearing the highways? As if in answer to her question, a bulky hulk of something veered suddenly in front of her. She gave a quick turn of the steering wheel and missed the great plow merely by inches. Buried in a snowdrift, it was!

Startled, she concentrated hard on her driving, wondering where the road actually was as she crawled along, hoping desperately that she was near an exit. An exit with motels nearby. She would get a room and wait the storm out. It was impossible to go on.

Inch by inch she moved forward, straining her eyes for road signs that were obliterated by the driving snow and wind. A light let-up in the gusting wind revealed a semi, jackknifed and in the median, with several other vehicles in the ditch, half-buried beneath the drifting snow. She dare not stop to see if anyone needed help lest she slide on the packed ice and follow suit. What's more, she feared if she once stopped she'd not be able to gain sufficient amount of traction to move forward, so deep was the snow.

She clutched the steering wheel with intense fierceness and mounting tension. Her knuckles showed white. She turned the radio on for news. An urgent voice all but commanded motorists to remain inside, off the highways. "All roads are impassable in this immediate area!" the State Highway Patrol officer exclaimed. "Thousands of motorists and vehicles are stranded. DO NOT TRAVEL!" he admonished. "Due to the 65 mile per hour winds piling the snow into 10 and 12 foot drifts, it's impossible for the snowplows to move." Grace Marie turned the radio off in disgust.

A sudden dark object loomed up in front of her. Slowly she applied the brakes and stopped, making sure to keep the motor running. It was another car. A man struggled through the howling wind and driving snow to her car. She rolled the window down partially.
"There's an exit somewhere near here," the man shouted above the howling, screeching, screaming wind, "but we can't seem to find it. There's a string of cars ahead of me. Soon as someone finds where the road is, maybe we'll move. Not before, lady!"

Grace managed a feeble "thank you" and wound the window up tight as the man disappeared suddenly out of sight.

Well, that was that! Like the many cars ahead of her, she would sit and wait. She was compelled to. And what about Glenda?

She hadn't thought about her girlfriend until now. But now the thought sickened her. Could it be, she wondered . . . could it just be possible that God was fighting against her and answering her mother's prayers?

Sitting in the car with nothing to do but think and to remember, Grace Marie remembered something. Very vividly so. Mrs. Collins was strongly opposed to her daughter's move to the distant state.

"Glenda's always been like an untamed wild lily," her mother had told her tearfully when the subject of the new job came up.

"'Evil communications corrupt good manners, Gracie dear,'" she'd added, "and affect good morals. Your father and I oppose this move, dear girl. There's plenty of good wholesome work right here in our own city; if you go, you do it against our wishes and our commands. . . ."

"I'm no longer a child," Grace remembered having said. "And while I've never been like Glenda, I do admire her greatly. She's not all bad, Mother."

"'A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump,'" Mrs. Collins had quoted sadly as, laying her hands upon Grace Marie's shoulders, she wept.

Sitting in the storm-tossed car now with absolutely nothing to do but think, Grace heard again her mother's tearful pleadings and prayer of the night before. Mother had gone downstairs to the kitchen. It must have been one or two or even three o'clock in the morning. Undoubtedly, she'd thought her entire household was asleep. And they had been; that was sure. But something . . . could it have been the groans and moans . . . awakened Grace Marie.
She tiptoed to the top of the stairs and listened. "Oh-h-h God!" she heard, "Stop my girl! At any cost, stop her, Lord God! Put obstacles in her way. . . ."

She hadn't waited to hear more. Noiselessly she made her way back to the bedroom and, crawling between the sheets, she pulled the covers well over her ears to drown out the groans and the sobbing of her broken-hearted mother.

When she finally went back to sleep, it was only to dream troubled dreams. Her waking thoughts were troubled and the long-awaited and looked-for move to the distant state didn't seem nearly so glamorous as it had appeared earlier.

Even the car seemed to have rebelled at her insistence in the move as she stole out of the house and left with not a word to her parents: it coughed and sputtered and almost stopped completely for her as she started westward on the Interstate highway. And now . . .!

She dropped her head on the steering wheel and cried. Partly because she felt a slight disappointment at her hindrance to move on but more so because she had a sudden sickening feeling and fear that God was fighting against her -- trying to hinder her. It frightened her!

A light tap on the window made her raise her head quickly. With a quick hand she brushed the tears away and rolled the window partly down.

"We'll be moving, Lady!" a man's voice shouted above the raging blizzard. "Better not lose sight of the car in front of you. Stay as close to the bumper as you can."

Pulling the ear lappers of his cap more tightly about his ears and turning the collar of his coat up higher, he buried his wind-burned cheeks into the folds of the coat and was soon gone.

Grace Marie waited for what seemed like an eternity; then suddenly the car in front of her was totally obliterated. Slowly, slowly, she inched her way forward. A black object, just barely discernible, was the slowly moving car in
front of her. Cautiously she crept nearer. They were turning. It must be the
exit! Finally!

A sigh of relief escaped her tightly pinched lips as a motel sign loomed
up directly in front of her. The swirling, blinding, driving snow made eerie
shadows of the neon lights over the sign.

She drove the car to an open space on the far side of the motel and
stumbled through the blizzard to the entrance of the motel.

Her spirits sank lower when she was informed that all rooms had been
filled since before early noon.

"I can give you a blanket and a pillow," the desk clerk informed her
sweetly, "and you may sleep in the hallway like all these other motorists will
be doing for the night. . . ."

"Oh, thank you!" Grace replied, feeling suddenly very tired and weary
and exhausted from the tension of driving in the storm. "I will be so thankful
for a blanket. How much do I owe you?" She opened her purse.

The desk clerk laid a gentle hand over Grace Marie's. "Put your money
back in your purse," she said, smiling. "There's no charge for this. I'm only
sorry we have no rooms. Say," she added softly, "you look terribly young to
be traveling alone. Going far?" she asked gently. "Running away from
home?" she probed softly.

Grace lowered her blue eyes. "I . . . I was going to Denver," she
confessed.

"Denver? And alone?" The older woman searched Grace's face
earnestly as she led her up the stairs and down a long hallway to the supply
room. "No young, pretty girl should be going that far alone," she said
earnestly. You look sensible. Go home," she confided. "Take a bit of advice,
will you? I'm a mother; I have three lovely daughters and I do believe it would
kill me if one of mine went to a big, strange city alone.

Your mother living?" she asked gently. "Ye . . . yes," Grace stammered.

"And she's a wonderful mother, I'm sure."
"Oh, she is. She is!"

"Then don't break her heart, honey, by going to some big city where you think you'll have your freedom. You can soon get into one of the greatest and biggest messes of your life and lose your freedom. The so-called 'freedom' of this younger set isn't freedom at all. It's slavery! Pure slavery! They become slaves to immorality and drugs and booze. Do you want that kind of 'freedom,' honey? Of course you don't. I can tell it in your face. If I know anything about character, you've had a proper upbringing. . . ."

"I've had a wonderful home," Grace admitted. "But Glenda . . . a girlfriend . . . wanted me to come to Denver and share her apartment. I have a job waiting for me."

"Tell me more about Glenda, honey."

In spite of her usual reservations in talking freely to strangers, Grace Marie found herself confiding in the motherly desk clerk. She told her all about Glenda and of her parents' misgivings about the girl and the job.

"Don't go!" the desk clerk admonished. "Your father and mother are right. Now you listen to me, honey; as soon as the storm's over and the roads are opened, you head east . . . for home. I'll contact Glenda for you, if you'd like."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. . . ."

"Mrs. Duane Sumpter is my name."

"Thank you most kindly, Mrs. Sumpter. I'm Grace Marie Collins, and I'd truly appreciate your help. Here's Glenda's number and you must take this money to pay for the call. Glenda's quite persuasive and you can do more with her than if I called. Tell her I'll not be coming. Not ever!"

"Good girl!" the desk clerk exclaimed. "I knew you were a sensible girl, Grace Marie. Here's your blanket and pillow. Find a place on the floor where you don't see any other blanket, and may you sleep soundly. I must be getting back to the desk now. Betty's caring for things till I return, but I'm to be
on duty, not her, and I have always believed one should do only the very best at his or her work, so I'll be hurrying along. Good night, and sweet dreams."

"Good night, Mrs. Sumpter, and thanks for . . . your advice and for the pillow and blanket."

Grace watched until Mrs. Sumpter disappeared down the long corridor of the mammoth motel; then she found a place where no other blanket was spread and sat on the floor, recounting everything that had happened in one short day.

She put her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. She hadn't been as smart nor as grown up as she thought she was. No, she wasn't smart at all. A wise son or daughter, according to Proverbs, was one who obeyed his or her parents. In the light of the Scriptures, she was a "foolish" child.

She shifted uneasily at the thought and changed positions slightly; then she stood up and folded the blanket in half, slipping between the folds on the floor and, closing her eyes, she tried to sleep.

It felt good to stretch out and close her tired eyes even though the mental picture of the raging blizzard kept doing quick flashbacks to her tired mind.

She must have slept, for a small child's startled cry from near her own floor bed roused her to half-awareness.

"Mommie! Mommie!" he wailed pitifully between spasms of fierce coughing. "Mom . . . mie!"

Grace sat suddenly upright, fully awake now.

"Mommie! Mommie!" the little fellow cried pitifully.

"Sh-h! Sh-h, dear. Mommie's right here!" a soft voice answered as the mother's kind and gentle hand patted her ill and frightened son.

Grace watched until the mother's soft caresses and her gentle love and concern and care put the little fellow's mind at ease and he was soon
sleeping soundly again. She then tried to go back to sleep; but try as she might, it seemed only to evade her. She was troubled inwardly. A soft Voice seemed to prod her soul: "I would comfort you like the mother comforted her child, but you will not allow Me. . . ."

She turned restlessly. The floor seemed unusually hard and uncomfortable. She would have gotten up and walked about a bit but the hallway was filled with sleeping, stranded motorists and their families. She must not disturb anyone.

"Come unto Me . . . I will give you rest." The Voice continued to plead tenderly.

Turning in her blanket and covering her head with a part of its protecting fold, she cried out penitently, "Jesus, I come!"

Tears spilled their way in a torrential stream down her pretty face as she sobbed, "Here's my heart, blessed Jesus . . . my stubborn, rebellious heart. . .! Please take me back and forgive me and save me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation. . . ."

In the stillness of the long hallway, while the blizzard outside raged on with fierce intensity and devastation, a lone figure raised herself upright and looked about her. Everything was changed. Made new!

Laughing for joy, she lay down again. Peace, like a great inexpressible calm, pervaded her entire being and filled her soul with real happiness and true satisfaction.

Closing her eyes, she thanked God for the storm. Tomorrow, Lord willing, or just as soon as the roads were passable, she would go home.

A happy feeling welled up inside her. It was a feeling akin to that of one who has lost his way and direction but found it again . . . and knew she was traveling right.

She sighed contentedly as sleep overtook her.