

In The Teeth Of The Storm

By J. W. Henson

1993 was a fierce winter . Cold winds blew, snow fell in record amounts and many had to do without the comforts of heat, water, and light for days and some for weeks. Yes, I remember the season well. Things that can be remembered from such long ago years must have made an impact on us. In fact things that are remembered over long periods of time are things that infect us with great pleasure, sorrow, embarrassment, need or joy. Those are the things that shock our strong emotions and imprint themselves permanently upon our memories. This story is true except for the conversations supplied.

I remember the time just like it was yesterday. The temperature had hovered in the mid 20 degrees for the previous days. Snow had intermittently fallen from light to fierce. I had spent much of the afternoon with a good book in the den of our warm home. It was a pleasant season for me because it was a time when there were no chores to be done on the outside. Not an occasion where one would really wish to be out-of-doors either. It was a time for slippers, house robe and a good book. I had read, drowsed off to a light sleep, became alert again and reread the portion where I had lost consciousness. It was glorious until...!

All at once Jane appeared in the door from the kitchen wiping her hands on a pretty apron that was tied smartly about her waist.

“Now John you have had your repose. It time you were up and about for me. We will be in need of some extra groceries if this storm is to last over the weekend.”

With this horrible thought out in the open she handed me a slip of paper with her desires plainly written.

“Well you must realize that there is no transportation down off the Stonehenge today,” I said. “It would be treacherous, even impossible to take the car out just now. Surely we can make a few days more with the provisions we have on hand. In fact, a meager diet is just what...”

She interrupted me at that point with, “Now John don’t be difficult. Pull on your shoes, heavy hooded jacket and walk down off the mountain to the market.”

“But love” I remonstrated, “It’s just three hours until dark. It’s dangerous out there!”

“I’ll have a nice supper ready when you return,” she called disappearing again into the kitchen.

With resignation I folded the shopping list and inserted it into my shirt pocket. There was no use discussing such matters with 'she who must be obeyed'!

Dressed for the harsh weather I placed a gentle kiss on Jane's neck, thinking it could be my last, opened the door and stepped out against the raw elements. I drew a quick breath as the change caught me full force. I stuck my gloved hands into the pockets of the coat and started for the street. Suddenly my feet went out from under me and I was on my back sliding down the inclined driveway. Removing the hands from deep pockets, I recovered my footing and all the more carefully started downward again.

I walked up Gloucester Lane to Main Street and took a right to go down off the Stonehenge by road. I soon began to think that maybe I could have a shorter walk down through the forest to the Funeral Home and then along the street to the market. I started down through the woodland, but it was partially encumbered with brambles, shrubs and trees that had fallen during a mighty windstorm a couple of years before. The grade was much steeper than I remembered but in about 30 minutes I was skirting the lawn of the Funeral Home. They had no business for which I was thankful.

In the market I retrieved the list that had been given to me. I was shocked! There was a gallon of milk, five pounds of baking potatoes, a loaf of bread and an assortment of fruits and vegetables. I needed a horse to carry that entire load. After getting the groceries assembled and valued through the checkout, I started for the door. Just as I was preparing to exit, in came my friend Daniel Waffer. He wished to talk, but I said that I must hurry back up the Stonehenge before darkness caught me in that awesome forest.

Back around the Funeral Home and into the forest I went. The snow was about a foot deep and falling in beautiful large, white flakes. The forest was white and silent. Snow covered the bushes and trees as well as the ground and dampened all sound, even the crunch of my footstep. With the load of three bags of groceries, I found the mountain much steeper and forlorn than it had appeared on descending. I stepped carefully over and around all the fallen trees that would encumber my way. I had to pause frequently to get my breath and allow the thumping of my heart to lessen. Once I stopped and sat on a stool-high stump, setting the groceries in the snow. Soon I was getting drowsy and recognized this as a warning, so I arose and started upward again. The snow had begun to fall faster making a wonderland that I loved to pause and observe. My fingers were being sculpted by the weight of those three bags. I changed hands with the heavy one for the two lighter from time to time and again. It was a memorable climb; one I could not have anticipated when I began the journey an hour before. Onward I pressed ever higher, ever slower and my lungs began puffing like an engine, and were on the verge of bursting from exhaustion. Had it not been for the steep elevation before me I would have lost all orientation and wandered about in hopeless circles. Oh how I wished it had been she who had gone for the vittles and left me to ponder the plot of my book in the den. However she would never have been able to make such an arduous journey, it was only a pipe dream, nothing more.

There were more pit-falls going up than down. I stepped on rocks, and limbs that were

covered with leaves and snow. They brought me to my knees a couple of times. Once, there was a rotted out stump hole where I sank up to my right knee. I wished to sit and rest, but had heard stories that it was dangerous to do so. I pressed on! The snow was beginning to fall thicker and this caused me to push along all the faster. Just as I was nearing Main Street on top of the mountain a wind gusted from the west and the snow fell all the thicker. Fearing more snow I rushed, gasping for breath for the street. Maybe a hundred yards from the road the snow fell thick and fast, so fast that just before reaching the street I could not see the number of fingers that I was holding before my face. I moved on and at last stumbled over the street's curb and out onto the road.

I turned to my right and positioned my back to the curb. At the curb with my back set perpendicular against it I started for the far side of the street, pushing my right foot before me. At last my toe thumped the curb of the far side. I sat a bag of groceries on the snow and felt for the curb with my hand to be certain that what my toe touched was truly the curb. It was! Regaining my grocery sack, I moved sideways to the right, continually bumping the curb with my right toe. It was slow going, but at least I knew where I was. After about 15 minutes my foot could no longer find the curb. A fear grasped me. I might have turned and be going down the center of the street or even in the other direction. If I should become disoriented I might never with a certainty know again where I was. I moved sideways to my left a step and there was the curb again. I thought that I must be at the driveway going down to Dr. Akins' house. His mailbox stood close against the road. Was I in the correct location? I put the three grocery bags into my left hand and began to move my right arm back and forth before me. At last it made contact with the box. Glory! I was where I had hoped to be.

Gloucester Lane turned left about 50 yards beyond this driveway. I moved carefully to my right again and often would reach down to feel the edge of the driveway. At last I again reestablished the curb on the far side of the driveway. In about 15 minutes of careful proceeding, I came again to the end of the curb. I reached down and found that it was in truth curving down Gloucester Lane.

I guess it was not until I made Gloucester Lane that I noticed that it was dark, dark like the inside of a cave. I could see no light and hear no sound except for a gentle swish of the wind. Following the street down to our driveway was not as frightening as walking on the level. There wasn't the fear of becoming disoriented. The street sloped downward and just beyond our house was a cul de sac. If I were to get turned around now I would at least recognize if I were going up grade or down and if I missed our driveway the cull de sac would stop me at the bottom of the street.

Still I bumped the curb with my right foot just to be sure. I was so weary. I set the groceries on the snow and dropped down beside them. I really didn't care if I ever recovered the warmth of home. I don't know how long I was there but in a drowsed condition I regained my footing, lifted my burden and started on down. At long last I no longer had a curb. Backing up a step I found it again. Emptying my right hand I began a search for our mailbox. I took another step back uphill and there it was. I reloaded the groceries and again discovered the driveway. I continued on down Gloucester Lane until

I found the far curb. I put the bags of food that was in my left hand down and began crawling up the driveway feeling for the verge between lawn and asphalt. It was a long slow crawl, dragging groceries with one hand and searching with the other. I was sure that by this time the milk was frozen solid.

At last I contacted the edge of our sidewalk and turned right continued to crawl until I reached the steps going up to the porch. Fumbling for my keys, I unlocked the door and stumbled into the warm, lighted house. I had made it! I moved the groceries into the kitchen and began removing the stiff, cold outer clothing.

Just then Jane appeared. "So! At last you are home! I bet you had an hour's idle talk to someone in the market and with me waiting for the groceries, too! I warned you not to dawdle, but to return directly with the groceries. My, look at your clothes. What were you doing, making a snowman?"

I said nothing, but returned to the den and my stuffed chair. It was delicious just to be warm and comfortably seated. I was about to drop off to sleep when the phone rang. I heard Jane answer, so I quietly picked up the extension to see who might be calling on such a miserable night. It was Daniel on the phone and he was saying, "Did John make it back home okay? I met him in the market, but he was in such a hurry he only spoke and rushed out into the blizzard."

"Blizzard?" Jane asked.

"Yes! Blizzard, didn't he tell you? You couldn't see your hand before your face. There's not a man in a hundred that could have traversed such a storm, found his way so far, and yet lived."

Jane hung up the phone and came into the den. "*You're a man in a hundred!* I appreciate what you did. Tell me about the blizzard, was it bad?"