

A Special Providence

Lucy Furman

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MRS. MELISSA ALLGOOD settled herself in her rocking-chair for a good talk. "I was telling you," she began, "about Sister Belle Keen and Brother Singleton and me being a Holiness Band last summer, and preaching all around in middle Kentucky, and about Brother Singleton taking down so sick at Smithsboro, and Sister Belle getting her eyes opened, and marrying him, and taking him home.

"Well, that broke up the band; for of course a lone widow woman, going on thirty-four years old, can't go preaching over the country with nothing but a tent to keep her company, no matter how much heartfelt religion and sanctification she's got. Anyhow, I felt like I'd done about enough work for one summer, and like now was my time to rest awhile. Sister Belle she had me keep fifteen dollars of the collection we took up the last night, and I knew I better be getting alone home while I had the money to go on. So I stayed around a few days with the folks there at Smithsboro, and then started home. Smithsboro is pretty near up to Louisville, and I had to take a roundabout way to get home, going down by Bowling Green and Guthrie, and then up again to the Station.

"Most of Smithsboro was down at the noon train to see me off, and I hated bad to leave them all. Lots of the women folks had give me presents to carry home with me. My valise was so full I had to set on it to fasten it, and I had a big bandbox full of lunch — because them Smithsboro people said they couldn't bear to think of me traveling hungry — and a large-sized basket, with a lot of young fruit-trees and rose and geranium plants, and others, that different ones had give me; and here, at the last minute, old Sister Macklin she brought me down to the train six cans of Indian peaches she had put up herself — those half-gallon glass cans. I didn't see how on earth I was going to get home with 'em all, especially the cans of peaches, and change cars at Guthrie; but I never was in a tight place yet that the Lord didn't help me out, and I had faith that somebody would be provided to pack them cans around when it come time to change cars, and rested easy on the promise. I set the cans down on the floor of the car underneath the seat, and piled the other things up on the seat in front of me to keep them from jostling the cans, and then I set back in perfect peace, and spread my Bible open in my lap, reading to read when I got tired looking at the folks in the car.

"There wasn't much to look at, being all men folks, and it was a mighty hot day, and I had eat a big dinner, and look like I couldn't keep from nodding to save my life. I reckon I must have fell asleep, for first thing I knew I was woke up by my head getting a hard bump against the side of the car. It made me so blind I couldn't see for a minute, but when I could the first thing I laid eyes on was an old gentleman leaning over the back of my seat fanning me with a big palm-leaf fan, and trying to tuck a pillow behind my head. 'Madam,' he says, 'allow me to make you more comfortable. I hope you ain't suffering from that bump you got.' I set up straight, and took a good look at him. He was a real nice, pious-looking old gentleman, about sixty-five years old, with gray hair and whiskers, and mighty bland ways. I never saw anybody I liked the looks of any better. 'I hope you'll accept of this pillow,' he says, 'to rest your head on. I find it a mighty useful thing to travel with.' I wouldn't have hurt the old man's feelings for anything; so I leaned back against it, and thanked him as polite as I could, and told him how much beholden I was to him for his kindness, and which nobody knew better how to appreciate than a lone widow woman like me. He leaned over the back of my seat, and fanned me the politest that ever was, and said, no, indeed; the obligations was all on his side; that when he met up with a young female like me, traveling over the wide, wide world without any natchul protector, or no strong arm to lean on, it raised his sympathies up to that point he considered it a blessed privilege to be any assistance to such a one, and especially, he said, when it happened to be a godly female like he could see I was, by my traveling with a Bible, and reading it so industrious. He said it was a sight that brought joy to his soul, in this generation of vipers, to see a righteous woman. Then, of course, I had to tell him all about my conversion, and getting sanctification, and feeling called to preach and save sinners, and about the meetings we'd been carrying on all the summer. Then he told me about his living down in Tennessee, and being an elder in the church, and said he'd just been up to Louisville on a little trip, but had found

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it a terrible ungodly place, and was glad to get out of it. The minute he said he lived down in Tennessee, I says to myself that instant, 'Here's my special providence the Lord has provided to help me change cars, and pack them cans at Guthrie,' and I just give thanks in my soul, and rejoiced.

"We talked on, and had a mighty entertaining conversation on religion. He said he couldn't agree with me on sanctification; but I read Bible to him on that line, and expounded till he said he didn't know but what I was right — that if there ever was anybody truly sanctified and free from sin he believed it must be me. And I felt plumb happy over his being convinced, and over me being the one to lead him out of Babylon. Then he asked me a heap of questions, and seemed to take a real fatherly interest in me. Then he commenced telling about himself, and said he was a widower, and done lost three as dear companions as ever shed their rays on mortal man, and how the last one had been in glory just a year to the day, and how lonesome he was, his children being all married off. I felt awful sorry for him. It always did seem to me like a man was a mighty incomplete thing without a wife to steady him, and always reminded me of a young colt. You know there ain't a more foolish animal on earth than a colt. He'll head off across a field, and after while he'll bring up short, and wonder what he's there for; then he'll kick up, and strike away in another direction — don't seem to have any object in life. It's the same way with a lone man, and any woman with feelings is bound to feel sorry for 'em. I couldn't have felt more sorry for my own father than I did for that old man. I told him all my sympathies was with him. He said if ever there was a man needed sympathy he knew it was him; that look like he had more trouble than he could bear. I asked him what his particular trouble was, and he give a big groan, and said he was going to confide in me.

"He said he'd been looking around for the last two or three months, it being natchul for a man that had had three such dear companions to feel the need of another when they was taken; that he'd heard a heap about these matrimonial associations around over the country, that brings people together by advertising; and he said he felt led to put a card in one of them matrimonial newspapers, giving a description of himself and his intentions. He said the very next week he got an answer to it from a lady up at Louisville, 'a widow, refined, thirty-two, and a brunette, without incumbrances, and willing to correspond with a view to matrimony.' Said that description suited him exactly. That he'd always wanted to marry a Kentuckian, somehow, but look like the other three times he never quite made it, his other three dear companions having come from Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. But he said this time he made up his mind from the start that he'd try for a Kentucky woman — that there was something mighty beguiling about them. Then he said her being a brunette suited him, too — that all his three other companions had been blue-eyed, and he felt like he'd enjoy a little change and variety. Then he said her being without incumbrances was another good thing; that at his time of life he didn't feel warranted in taking a family to raise up. So he said he answered right back, and the letters commenced to fly pretty lively, and in two weeks' time all the arrangements was made, and the day set. He said, out of compliment to his last dear departed companion, he set the anniversary of her death for the wedding-day. He said he turned in then, and told all his connection and friends about his going to be married; and they made big arrangements about giving him a house-warming when he got back, and welcoming the bride, and saw him off on the train, and told him he could count on all of them being there, and more too, when he got back, to meet the bride. So he said he started off, rejoicing in his heart.

"He said he got to Louisville about five o'clock in the evening, and spruced himself up a little at the station, — clean collar and such, — and set out to hunt the widow. That he found the number all right, — a real nice-looking frame house, — and rung the bell; and who should come to the door but the widow herself? He said the sight of her just natchully paralyzed him; that he had made allowances for a woman's natchul good opinion of herself, and hadn't set his expectations up too high. But he said she just laid it over all the women he had ever seen before; that none of them couldn't compare with her. That her eyes was the blackest, and her teeth the whitest, and her cheeks the rosiest he ever did see, and she was as round and plump as a partridge, and never looked a day over twenty-nine. That he fairly held his breath to think of him marrying such a wife as that — that none of his three dear companions couldn't hold a candle to her in looks. That she treated him the politest and most affectionate that ever was, and hung up his hat for him, and took him in the parlor, and set and talked until supper about their wedding and plans and such, and then made him go out and eat supper with her and her kin that she was staying with. Said he never was treated as nice in his life; that she just honeyed him up and paid him more compliments than ever was, and looked at him like she thought he was just too sweet for anything. Said after supper she told him she had a heap of things to do — packing and such — to get ready for to-morrow, and she expect she'd have to send him down to his hotel right away to get a chance. He told her he was agreeable; that it was like pulling

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teeth to leave her that early in the evening, but he wasn't the man to interfere with any woman's wedding plans, and go he would. She told him to see that he got there in plenty of time in the morning — that she was might'ly afraid he'd keep her waiting, that she was going to have the preacher there at eight o'clock sharp, and didn't want the bridegroom to be behind time. That she just made eyes at him till he was plumb crazy, and then she kissed him good-by and sent him off.

"He said just as he got about half-way down the square from her house he met up with a big, tall man, with a red mustache and a broad-brimmed hat, and his pants tucked in his boots, and a leather belt on. Said the man was stopping before every house to look at the numbers, and that he knew the minute he laid eyes on the man that he was from Texas, from the way he walked all over the sidewalk. That he turned around, and looked at the man several times after he passed by him, and after while the man stopped in front of the widow's house, and looked at the number, and took a piece of paper out of his pocket and looked at that, and then opened the gate and went in. He said he knew in a minute it was some of the widow's Texas kin come up to her wedding, and was might'ly tickled over it.

"So he said he went to the hotel then, and stayed all night, and got up betimes in the morning so as he wouldn't be late for the wedding; that by five o'clock he was up and dressed in his wedding clothes, and then he had to set around and wait till half-past six before they'd give him any breakfast, them city people being such late risers. That at seven he got a hack, and started out to the bride's. That when he got there, lo and behold! there was another carriage standing there at the gate, and not no common hack neither, but what he called a landau, with the top all throwed back, and a driver with a stove-pipe hat. Said he supposed it belonged to the bride's rich kin, and never worried no more about it, but got out of his hack and started up the walk. That just as he got to the bottom of the steps the front door opened, and out walked the widow, hanging on the arm of that red-headed Texas man, and smiling back over her shoulder at the folks inside. Said when she turned her head and laid eyes on him, she just give one scream, and dodged behind the Texas man, and hung on to his shoulders hollering and weeping. That the Texas man he looked plumb dazed, but he just natchully got two pistols out of his pockets to have 'em handy. That the old gentleman then he spoke up and asked what it was all about, and why, when a honorable man come to get his bride, folks wanted to meet him at the front door with pistols. Nobody couldn't answer him, seemed like, till a man that looked like a preacher stepped out of the door, and asked him who it was that he expect to marry, and he told the preacher it was the lady there in the door, and the preacher said he just done married that lady to another gentleman, and there must be some mistake. Then the widow she bu'st out crying worse than ever, and said she knew she had promised to marry the old gentleman, but that was the evening previous, before she had seen the gentleman from Texas, and learned to love him with undying love. Said she been carrying on a correspondence with 'em both, and set the same wedding-day for both of 'em, thinking whichever she liked best when they got there she would take. Said she thought she liked the old gentleman when she saw him, but after she laid eyes on the Texas man, her present husband, she knew that her heart was his forever, so she had the wedding at seven in the morning instead of eight, thinking they'd be off before the old gentleman come, so 's to save his feelings: and which they would have been off in five minutes more, and she hoped the old gentleman would forgive her, that she'd never do it again. 'And then,' the old gentleman says, 'her and the Texas man got in the landau and rode off, and the folks throwed old shoes and rice after 'em.'

"Look like the old man felt the worst about it that ever was. He just laid his head down on the back of my seat and groaned. 'To think,' he says, 'of me giving my heart into the hands of such a female as that — such a fickle, heartless, deceiving woman, and one with such poor taste! But he said what he was suffering from her treating him that scandalous way wasn't by no means the worst of it; that it was having the world know a man's sorrows that was the hardest to bear. Said he could have stood it if nobody had knowed it but him; but when he thought about his children and kin and friends all fixing for such a big housewarming that evening, and the whole town being at the train to meet him and his bride, looked like his heart would certainly break in two. He said man was certainly born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward.

"I tried to cheer him up all I could, and told him he certainly had a heap to bear, but I never doubted it would be sanctified to him in the end, if he would bear it patient; that the Lord always provided a balm for wounded feelings, and bound up the broken heart. The old gentleman he leaned his elbow on the window-sill, and his head on his hand, and looked out of the window, the dolefullest you ever saw, and every now and then he'd fetch a groan. I felt awful sorry for him. I never could understand how a woman could have the heart to treat a man so

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bad.

"By and by he raised his head up again, like a new notion struck him. 'The Lord will provide,' he says, 'the Lord will provide,' kind of to himself, over and over. Then he took a good look at me. Then he leaned over the back of my seat again. 'Sister Allgood, madam,' he says, 'it ain't for me to say the Lord don't work in mysterious ways his wonders to perform, or that he deserts the righteous in their hour of need. No; as I have set here I have seen his wonderful works and intentions. As I set here I see the special providence he has provided for me. In you, madam, I see that special providence — that balm which is to bind up my wounds. In you I see the wife sent to me from heaven, and just in the nick of time. I see now that it never was intended for me to marry a black-eyed woman. Blue eyes I know and have tried, and am going to stick to them. Yes; in them eyes of yours I behold truth and constancy and affection. And the train stops thirty minutes for supper at Guthrie, and I'll get a preacher there to marry us, and when I get off the train at my home I'll have a bride for them to welcome and housewarm, and won't have my head bowed to the dust in humiliation and broken heart.'

He laid his hand on my shoulder. I was just natchully struck dumb, and couldn't have said a word if I'd had a chance. 'Don't speak,' he says; 'a woman is always opposed to making up her mind in a hurry; but it's all right. This is a special providence, and the will of God. I know all you would say — a woman can't help being coy and bashful. But never mind; it's all right.' He patted me on the shoulder. 'But, brother — ' I says. 'Don't mention it,' he says. 'Do you reckon such frivolous things as clothes enters into my calculations?' 'It ain't clothes, brother,' I says; 'it's — ' 'It is short notice,' he says, 'but I couldn't love you better if I had knowed you a thousand years. You needn't have no fears about my affection, or about me making a good husband. If my three dear departed companions could rise up here in this car and give their testimony, it would convince you.' 'Yes, sir,' I says; 'I don't doubt it would; but — ' 'Of course I ain't as young as I used to be; but my folks are a long-lived family, and don't age soon. My father died at ninety, hale and hearty, and my grandfather at ninety-five, spry as a kitten. No, madam; a man is as old as he feels; and I assure you I don't feel a day over forty. We will have a long life to live together.'

"And so that old man went on, and I couldn't get in a word edgewise, for every time I'd start to say anything he'd take the words out of my mouth. Look like he never seemed to have no earthly idea maybe I didn't want to marry him. I commenced to get plumb scared and trembly. I actually got afraid that old man would overpersuade me to marry him against my will. Seem like there wasn't anything on earth I could do or say but just set there and listen to him talk. It was awful — I didn't know what in the world to do, and just set there in a cold perspiration.

"At last the train stopped at a station, and a mighty nice-looking old lady got on — the only lady besides me in the car. Then I felt better. I told the old gentleman I was very tired, and felt like I must have a little rest, and if he would go into the smoking-car and take a smoke for a while, I would try to rest myself. He said certainly, but he wanted me to understand he couldn't stay away from me long, and would make that pipe a short one. As soon as he was out of the car I run over and set down by the old lady, and told her as quick as I could what a trouble I was in, and how I never knew how on earth to get rid of the old gentleman. She felt awful sorry for me, and told me not to cry; that we'd fix it up all right, and there wasn't no real danger. She said she reckoned the old man's mind was a little turned by his trouble, but she'd see that I got away from him all right at Guthrie. That I would have to wait ten minutes at Guthrie for my train going north, and his train would wait there half an hour for supper before going south, and the thing for her and me to do would be to get him started off to hunt a preacher so 's he wouldn't be on hand when my train left, and I would get off all right on my train for home. She said it would be as easy as falling off a log. She said for me to send him to her to make inquiries about a preacher, and she would fix him so he wouldn't get back under half an hour. She told me to treat him just the same as I had, when he come back from the smoking-car, and not to rile him or cross him any.

"So when he come back in the car I did like she said. He never seemed to expect me to say anything anyhow, so I just let him go ahead and talk and plan and rejoice, though I felt like an awful hypocrite.

"Finally we got to Guthrie about six o'clock that evening, and the old gentleman helped me and my bandbox and valise and basket and cans off the nicest kind, and took me to the waiting-room. Then he said he must hurry out and get the preacher that was to make him the happiest man on earth, and for me not to stir till he come back. I told him he better inquire where to find a preacher, and I expect that lady setting over the other side of the room might know something about the preachers down this way. So he went over and asked her, and I felt like a whited sepulcher. Then he started off a-running.

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"Them ten minutes before my train come seemed to me more like ten years. I just set there and shook, I was so afraid the old gentleman would meet up with a preacher on the way, and get back before my train started, or that my train would be late. But finally my train whistled, and the old lady she picked up my valise and bandbox, and I jerked up the basket of fruit—trees and the six cans of peaches, and we made for the train. The folks that was inside the car all had to get out before I could get in, and looked to me like I would certainly go raving, distracted crazy, they were so slow. But at last the very last one come down the steps, and I had just set foot on the lowest step, and the conductor was bracing me from behind — me not being able to catch hold of anything on account of my arms being so full — when I heard a yell that fairly knocked the life out of me, so 's I couldn't move hand or foot, but was just petrified where I was at, and if the conductor hadn't been boosting me like he was I reckon I'd have fell off that step like a bag of meal. I cast one eye down the station platform, and there come the old gentleman, his coat—tails flying, and him yelling every step of the way, and the preacher he had got trying to keep up with him. 'Lord, help!' I says; 'Lord, help!' I knew if the Lord didn't help me I was gone. Then I turned them fruit—trees and them six cans of Indian peaches loose, and grabbed hold of the railing, and got the strength from heaven to climb up the steps of that car and on to the platform of it. The glass cans rolled down, and bu'sted as they fell, and the peaches just went all over the depot platform there, and when the old gentleman come a—tearing along, he never did a thing but slip up on them peaches and fall all over himself. And just then the train it commenced to pull out, and the conductor jumped on with my valise and bandbox, and the last I seen of the old gentleman he was still a—squirming around in them Indian peaches in his wedding—clothes, trying to get on his feet, and still a—yelling. And I just rejoiced and give thanks and shouted, because I knew I had been mightily delivered. And of course I felt awful sorry for the old gentleman; but, like the Bible says, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' And how could anybody expect me to be keeper to a crazy man, anyhow?"

"I've had a many a experience with widowers in my time, and got mighty little respect for 'em anyway, but that was the narrowest escape I ever had, or ever hope to have."

Lucy S. Furman.