

PROVIDENCE

"Now don't yo' cry, honey," the old ranchman said, laying his big hand over the girl's, where it rested, clenched, on her knee.

He had known her all her life long and had loved her from the moment her father took her, a brown, blinking baby, out of her mother's arms and put her proudly into his, saying, "Providence—that's what we've agreed to call her, my girl and me. It's a name we put monstrous faith in, Neighbor Sherr."

It seemed just the other day, and yet here was the brown baby become a brown girl, with eyes almost on a level with his, and strong young shoulders brave to bear such burdens as life laid upon them. The little prairie mother had died, and after some restless, unproductive years the man, who had lost the best part of his life in losing her, was buried beside her. They said the climate killed her.

At the last he talked much of his old home in the North, and one day he wrote a letter back to some of his own people, asking them to take Providence when he was gone.

Providence read the answer to him when it came, and Neighbor Sherr stood by to listen. Yes, they would take her, these unknown Northern cousins, and do by her as well as their means would permit. The careful phrases were religiously dutiful and cold, even to Providence, but her father's joy lent them the needed grace.

"Yo'll go, won't yo'?" he asked, eagerly.

"If yo' say so, pa," Providence sobbed, with her head beside his on the pillow. He died that night. It seemed as if he had only been waiting for the letter.

When the funeral was over the girl went home with Neighbor Sherr to make ready for her journey. There was little to do to make ready, only to lock the old black valise where she had already packed an extra dress of her own and some valueless things that had belonged to her father and mother.

When the wagon was brought to the door Neighbor Sherr helped Providence up to the high spring seat and put the valise at her feet.

As they drove off across the prairie toward the railway town the old ranchman looked ahead prophetically, but Providence looked backward.

The two ranches lay side by side. She saw Neighbor Sherr's corral and sheds, his old ranch-house, and Jose standing in the stoop, waving his sombrero, which glistened in the sun with all its tarnish of bells and beads.

She saw the dim, dark spot which was her father's new grave and the white stone that marked her mother's, and behind them the house, squatting lifeless and gray as a shadow, with blank windows staring after her like piteous eyes. Then she felt Neighbor Sherr's hand fall over hers and heard him say, "Now don't yo' cry, honey."

"I won't look any mo'," she said, convulsively. She turned and stared unblinkingly between the ears of the horse in front of her. But the tears kept rolling down and dropping off her quivering chin into her lap.

Neighbor Sherr swallowed hard at something in his throat.

"I say as yo' pa did," he said, steadily, "that it's the best thing yo' yo' to go. Yo'll see sights. Yo' never dreamed of, Providence. Build-ings to which the old ranch-house won't compare mo' n' a chaparral-cock's nest, and mountains and rivers and railroads. His spirits rose with his imagination, and then sank suddenly. "But when it's night and all sort of still and quietlike, yo'll be remembering how things was down hyar, honey, gat?"

"Oh, I wish yo' was goin', too!" she burst out.

He shook his head. "Wa-al, no, I consider that's out of the question. Yo' know Neighbor Sherr makes a considerable figger on his reservation, but he wouldn't be worth a two-bit piece what that's real folks."

She stared at him, dimly understanding. "I'll write to you regular—every week," she promised.

He looked uncomfortably down at the reins in his hands.

"I couldn't read a word of it, honey," he said, very low. "And so I writin' back again—wa-l, me n' a pen never could get a lg together, anyhow."

He looked up at her tear-stained face. "Yo' send the letters long just the same!" he exclaimed. "I can always tell what's in the beginning and ending, anyhow. An' now an' then maybe the post-office man will oblige me by reading of a line or two. An', anyway, it will be a heap o' comfort just to handle the things and look at 'em."

Providence frowned.

"No, that won't do nowadays," she said. "I tell yo'. That's all that nice colored paper yo' gave me so long ago, yo' recollect? I'll write on that, and when yo' get a pink sheet, that'll be first-class news, and a blue one will be middle-class, and if yo' get a green one, Neighbor Sherr, that'll mean that things are a-goin' just nowhat at all."

The ranch buildings were sinking on one side of the prairie as the little railroad town rose on the other, a seasaw fashion. Neighbor Sherr gave the horses their heads and the light wagon spun forward over the level. Along one of the two black lines of track that attached themselves to opposite sides of the town a train crawled like a caterpillar on a grass-stalk.

Neighbor Sherr helped her aboard and swung his hat as the coaches clanked by. He saw her face at the window, and he still saw it after the train was gone and he stood, dazed and alone, on the platform. And his old heart guessed how Providence had sunk forward with her head in the back of the next seat in a perfect apathy of despair.

On the fourth day the girl came to the end of her journey. She stumbled out upon the platform of the smart new station, gripping her valise, her amazed eyes vainly seeking for some one who should be there to meet her.

It was raining and cold, and she shivered as she had never shivered before. She went into the waiting room and sat down in the farthest corner, away from everybody. It was warm there. Her hat tipped forward, tangled wisps of her neglected hair brushed her cheeks, and her bare hands were shoved far into her sleeves.

A man came to the door and took her. She was a small, fair girl, and she had looked in at the

door at this time every day for a week. She was getting cross with disappointment, and above the steel bows of her spectacles her brows met in an impatient frown.

The room was so dim that she did not see the girl in the corner at first, but when she did she jerked the glasses up and down her sharp little nose, and exclaimed, softly, "For the land's sake!"

She crossed the room briskly. "Are yo' Asa More's girl?" she demanded. "Ya-as," drawled Providence.

"Then I guess we're looking for each other. I'm his cousin Sophia. Well, well!" Her breath came out in a little sudden gust that seemed to leave her exhausted. "Tired out?" she asked, as Providence still stared.

"Pretty nigh," the girl sighed.

"That's your valise, isn't it? We haven't so very far to go. Come on, now. We'll get right out of here."

They trudged along in silence down the sidewalk, which was slippery with fallen leaves. Providence shivered more and more. She paid no heed to the way she was taking, and was neither glad nor sorry when Miss Sophia opened the gate in a length of picket fence and led the way through it up on the verandah of a small, white house with plants in the windows. She took off her rubbers and set her umbrella up to drip.

"Getter shake your skirts good and wipe your feet on that mat," she suggested, and Providence obeyed. "That valise will do just as well out here for the present. Come in," and Providence went in.

The room was sitting-room and kitchen in one. There was a rag carpet on the floor, a shining cook-stove and a plump cushion in every chair. A stout woman with crimped hair came out through a door.

"Well," Sophia said to her, "here she is, Polly."

Polly kissed her, and Providence's heart went out to her in gratitude.

"Tired out and most frozen, aren't you?" she said. "Let me hang away your things, and yo' sit right down here by the fire and warm yourself."

Providence did as she was told. Miss Sophia tied on an apron and came and sat down in front of her.

"So your father's dead," she said, "and your mother, too. Poor Asa!" Back in her young days Asa More had been his cousin's romance, and she had never forgiven the woman he married. "Did he leave any property?"

Providence thought of the barren ranch and the house, with its dull, staring windows.

"That's the ranch," she explained. "We sold off most everything to pay the doctor an'—an' like that. It ain't worth much."

"For the land's sake, child!" Miss Sophia said. "What makes you draw your words so?"

"I don't know no other way," Providence answered humbly.

"Haven't you ever been to school?" "No."

"Well, I declare! And you a great girl. How old?"

"Comin' fifteen. I can read and write," Providence hurried out, eagerly.

"Read and write and fifteen years old!" The words were emphatically show. "I suppose your father taught you that. Well, I guess the sooner you get started in school the better."

"She sat a moment, thinking. "Are all your clothes in that valise?" "Yes," said Providence.

"Who made that dress you've got on?"

"I made it," Providence flushed. She had been very proud of her dress-making hitherto. Miss Sophia jerked the glasses up and down on her nose.

"Aren't there any women folks down where you live?" she exploded. Providence looked startled.

"Oh, yes, but I never see them. Only pa an' Neighbor Sherr an' Jose an'—an'—Choctaw Pete."

Miss Sophia was speechless.

"Heathen!" she said, at last, and got up to set the table. At bedtime Providence followed Miss Polly up the carpeted stairs to the warm, plain little room that had been made ready for her. Polly set down the light and opened the bed. Then she patted the girl on the back, smiled a good night and went out.

Providence undressed hurriedly, blew out the light and crept into bed. The bed teetered and bounded and the darkness whirled round her. Strange faces looked into hers, strange voices sounded in her ears. It was the after-effect of her journey, but she did not know it, and feared she was going to be ill.

"Providence, indeed! A doubtful Providence I call her."

It was a real voice this time, Miss Sophia's, speaking in the next room.

"Do you know, she hasn't a thing fit to wear and no money to speak of? Neighbor Sherr paid her passage, she says, so it seems Asa didn't have money for that, even. There won't be a cent coming to her from anywhere, as I can see."

"She isn't to blame," Polly maintained. "And I don't suppose Asa knew what else to do. We're the nearest folks he had anywhere. I shouldn't wonder if we'd be surprised in her. I mean to do the best I can by her, anyhow."

"So do I!" groaned Miss Sophia. "But how we're going to manage beats me. What's just enough for two people skips three dreadfully. And I don't believe I'll ever be able, to like her one particle. She's her mother right over and that's kind of set me against her."

"It'll all come out right, Sophia," said her sister. "We did our duty to say we'd take her, and now we've got her we're going to make the best of it. My heart fairly warms to the child."

Providence heard to the last word, sitting up in bed, with her hands to her ears and her eyes big and wild in the darkness. When the voices ceased she collapsed, and the pillow smothered her wail. "O pa! O ma!" reaching out after the sweet divinity she had scarcely known. "O Neighbor Sherr!"

Hope and resolve came with the morning. Providence was very womanly in some ways, and as she dressed in the warm room, where the sunlight was dancing, she pondered reasonably on what she had heard the night before. She had been adored and sheltered all her life long, and she had never known any strangers. She had come ready to love these women, and they had not loved her.

"I'll use 'em fair, anyway, an' I won't lay nothin' up against 'em," she thought. "Pa set a heap of store by 'em, and he wouldn't want me to be mean an' sassy. It's goin' to be powerful hard, but I'll do my best, and if I can't stand it, I'll—"

She clasped her hands under her chin and above them her face was wistful

—I'll mosey long back to Neighbor Sherr," she ended, with determination.

Providence could not go to school until she had something more fitting to wear than the old brown dress in which she had travelled northward.

But one morning Miss Sophia took her down to the Westford Academy. Providence knew more than merely to read and write, but she had to take her place among pupils much younger than herself. She was laughed at and whispered about and watched. The boys imitated her drawl and caricatured her and gave her nicknames. It was a cruel ordeal for Providence. The letters that went to Neighbor Sherr in those first trying days were steadily blue.

"If I sent him pink ones they'd make him feel easier, but they would not be true," she decided.

The sisters made over more clothing for her and bought her one new dress, a dull red cashmere. The day she wore it for the first time she sent a glowing pink messenger of happiness across the States to Neighbor Sherr. That same day a gift of something warm came into Miss Sophia's eyes, and she called Providence "a good child."

Winter sped away and the pink writing paper dwindled. Providence worked hard in school and earned two promotions, which brought her up with pupils nearer her own age. No one laughed at her now, and every one was kind to her. She was learning her way into books, and they opened for her the alluring vistas of a new, wonderful world.

At home Miss Polly taught her to sew and darn and Miss Sophia taught her housekeeping. Providence was eager to learn. She was beginning to love Northern ways for their own sake, and because they had been her father's ways.

A spirit breathed upon the North and it woke. Spring had come, languid and frail, but, oh, so lovely!

It was a long time since Providence had sent any but pink letters to Neighbor Sherr, and she was beginning to think they were the only kind she would ever need to send, when suddenly her fair skies came tumbling down about her in utter wrack of desolation.

One Saturday morning she was going downtown with Miss Sophia, who had to do some buying for the house. It seemed to Providence as she looked at her cousin that the springtime had quickened a new life in her, as well as in the lilacs and elms. There was a flush in her thin cheeks and her eyes shone behind their glasses.

As for the girl, she could hardly keep her feet following after each other in decorous order.

They were entering Main street when a man brushed by them, running. At the corner another man joined them. Others were hurrying up from every direction. The whole street seemed alive with excitement.

Before the bank a little crowd was gathering. Miss Sophia quickened her steps.

"Let's go over there," she said, and they went. Others joined the crowd before they did. One man was shaking his fists and screaming.

"It's a fraud. They're thieves and liars! They're taking money up to within twenty minutes of the time that notice was put there!"

"What notice? What notice?" Miss Sophia clutched the arm of the nearest man. He turned and looked at her dully.

"Can't you see for yourself?" he asked, pointing at the bank door.

"I can, Cousin Sophia," Providence said, clearly. "It says the bank is closed for the liquidation of its debts."

Miss Sophia tipped over against the girl, and her face was almost as white as the curtains in the bank windows.

"Closed!" she repeated. "And all our money is in there."

"Mine is, too," said the man who had spoken to her.

Providence led Miss Sophia home, and they broke the news to Miss Polly.

The neighbors came in to talk with them. They said a good many people in Westford were just as badly off, but that was cold comfort. And then the neighbors went away and they sat down in their misery, two suddenly old, helpless women, to contemplate the future.

Providence made tea and coaxed them to drink it. She cared for them and soothed them in a way they had not known, since they were children and had a mother. And all the time her head was busy with her own plans.

"There's the ranch—I'll sell the ranch," she thought. "It must be worth something to somebody, and even a little money will help them, so now, poor dears!"

When she could, she writing to her room and opened her writing-box. There was one sheet of pink paper, several of blue, and every one of the green left. The time had come when she must use the green.

She drew the sheet toward her with trembling fingers and dipped her pen. A moment she stared at the treetops swaying beyond her window, then she wrote hurriedly:

"Dear Neighbor Sherr: You must sell the ranch. My cousins have lost their money and will have to leave their house unless they get help somehow. I am going to work just as soon as I can, but I probably shall not be able to earn much. They have been very good to me. I want to do something for them now. Sell the ranch somehow. With love,

"Providence."

She knew that Neighbor Sherr would get someone to read the letter when he saw the green paper.

That night, as she lay wide-eyed and sleepless on her bed, the door opened and some one stole in. Providence saw the gleam of a white nightgown through the gloom and felt two cold, shaking hands fall upon her as she started up.

"Don't make any noise," Miss Sophia whispered. "Polly has just got to sleep."

Providence drew the old woman down beside her, and held her in her strong arms as if she were a child.

"I had to come, Sophia said. "I could not sleep. There are things to be done. We can't do anything for you now as we'd planned. I don't know, but seems to me I'm thinking more of you than I am of ourselves. You're everything in the world to me, Providence."

It was out at last. Providence's heart gave a bound. "I've tried to be grateful, Cousin Sophia," she answered, simply.

Sophia kissed her.

The bank's affairs were really in worse shape than had at first been

feared. Miss Sophia put a sign, "To Rent," over the front door and began to look about for rooms. Miss Polly made an inventory of their household stuff, and set apart a portion to be sold at auction.

Providence left school. She felt her place just now was with her cousins, who needed her constantly. Besides, she wanted to find something to do.

Even if Neighbor Sherr sold the ranch, it would probably not bring much. She had not heard from him, although she went expectantly to the post-office every day. Surely he must have had her letter, and the post-master at McKinley City would write a few lines for him in reply at any time. What did it mean? Was he sick?

Providence was growing very anxious. One cool, gray May afternoon, when she started for the post-office as usual, she opened the door right in the face of a big, roughly dressed man, who stood before it trying to ring the bell. She gave one look at him and tumbled into his arms.

"Neighbor Sherr!" she cried.

"I reckon. How's my money gal?" He lifted her face by the chin and studied it closely. Providence wanted to cry, but she laughed instead.

"Did you get the green letter?" she asked.

"That's what I did, if I gal, an' I was never so scared in all my life afo', 'thouten it was once when the sheriff drew a bead on me, thinking I was that boss-thievin', no-count coyote, Jim Perley."

The old lazy drawl was the sweetest sound Providence had heard for months. She drew Neighbor Sherr into the house and shut the door on him, and fell to hugging him again in her excitement. For a moment the keen recall to the old life made her forget the new; then all her trouble came rushing back upon her sevenfold.

"Oh, Neighbor Sherr! Have you sold the ranch?" she broke out, anxiously.

"No," he said; then, as he saw her disappointment, he hastened on, "and mebbe yo' won't care when yo' hear what I've got to tell yo'." He held his arms and leaned against the wall, his face sparkle with pent-up news.

"Way back, long ago as yo' pa bought that ranch, he 'lowed that was mo' to it than just common clay. Yo've heard him say so. Honey, it's just one big lie bubble. The experts as have been nosing round McKinley all winter say so. That's thousands o' barrels of lie that; an' that means mo' dollars for 'twixt Dallas an' Houston. M' Tony Walsh is working it up fo' yo'. I left it all to him, knowin' yo'd be willin'. He's got the longest head of any lawyer in Texas. I wouldn't let him write yo' a word till I saw yo' myself. But I reckon that's a letter on the way now explainin' the hull process. No, I reckon yo' won't sell the ranch, honey. Yo'll keep it till the las' gallon o' lies' run out, an' long afo' then yo'll be a rich woman. Honey, it's his gospel truth 'I'm tellin' yo', Neighbor Sherr ain't ever lied to yo' yet, an' he ain't a-doin' it now."

In the silence that followed, while Providence was trying to realize a little of it all he said, more to himself than her, looking down at his great right hand:

"I'd give that twice over if he could have lived to see this day, poor feller!" And Providence knew he was speaking of her father.—Etta Webb in the Youth's Companion.

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It is nearly 4 o'clock, and the sun is well up, before the first real gongster appears—the merry blackbird. Then comes the thrush, followed by the robin and the wren, and last the house sparrow and the tomtit.

Thus it will be seen that the lark's reputation as an early riser is not deserved. In fact, he is a very sluggard, for he does not rise until long after many hedgerow birds have been about for some time.

No one can do more than his best, but a great many could do no more than they think their best.

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