



The Secret Flower

and other stories

Jane Tyson Clement

The Secret Flower

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

The Secret Flower

and other stories

Jane Tyson Clement

Illustrations by Don Alexander



THE PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

©2000 by Plough Publishing House
All rights reserved.

ISBN 10: 0-87486-995-1
ISBN 13: 978-0-87486-995-8

Illustrations by Don Alexander
Illustrations Copyright ©2000 by Plough Publishing House.

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clement, Jane T., 1917-2000

The secret flower : and other stories / Jane Tyson Clement.

p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: The sparrow. 1968.

The sparrow—The storm—The innkeeper's son—The king of the land
in the middle—The white robin—The secret flower.

ISBN 0-87486-995-1

I. Christian fiction, American. I. Clement, Jane T., 1917-2000 Sparrow.

II. Title.

PS3553.L3933 S44 2000

813'.54-dc21

00-008159

Printed in the USA

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

Contents

BIRD ON THE BARE BRANCH (POEM)

The Sparrow

3

STRUGGLE (POEM)

The Storm

17

THE MASTER (POEM)

The Innkeeper's Son

33

THE CHAIN (POEM)

The King of the Land in the Middle

47

NOW BREAKS THE ICE (POEM)

The White Robin

71

THE GATE (POEM)

The Secret Flower

89

OH SEEK (POEM)



This is a preview. Get entire book here.

BIRD ON THE BARE BRANCH

Bird on the bare branch,
flinging your frail song
on the bleak air,
tenuous and brave—
like love in a bleak world,
and, like love,
pierced
with everlastingness.

O praise
that we too
may be struck through with light,
may shatter the barren cold
with pure melody
and sing
for Thy sake
till the hills are lit with love
and the deserts come to bloom.

J. T. C.



This is a preview. Get entire book here.

The Sparrow

IT WAS HIGH SUMMER. On the slopes the berry bushes showed the bare nubs where the children had passed through picking, and here and there an unripe cluster still hung, or a few overlooked under the leaves. In the woods the ferns had long since uncurled and the fronds sprang up cool and graceful. The deep greens of summer were misted over here and there in the fields and hedge-rows with purple and yellow of phlox and toadflax, the dull white of yarrow and Queen Anne's lace. The hedges were alive with bees in the blossoms, and with the carefree small birds, whose broods were raised. The road to the village of Drury was dusty, as it drove straight through the meadows, curved down a small hill, over the stone bridge, passed along the river valley into the woods, and came out to the cluster of dwellings and shops and the Black Pigeon Inn on the far side.

Just this side of the woods and set a bit back by itself was the cottage of Giles, the wheelwright. It was sturdy

but drab, the windows close-curtained and blank, the garden marred by a broken wheel flung down in a flowerbed. Giles hired out to the cartwright in Drury, the most prosperous artisan in the district. Giles was skilled and worth his hire when he was fit to work, but a wearisome man to deal with. Prudence, his wife, swept and scoured, baked and sewed, watched him with a fearful eye, and bent under the weight of discouragement.

His master was a pious man, with his pew in church and no vices, and was, in his way, just. But he was as cold and lifeless as a stone. He paid for what he hired, and those who worked for him toed the mark or went home with an empty pocket. He kept Giles because his craftsmanship was high and it paid well to use him in the intervals when he could work. The other times, Giles stalked out of the Black Pigeon and with dark, fearsome face went through the streets of the town, his long legs unsteadily deliberate; and then for a week or more he was seen, now here, now there about the countryside roaming aimlessly, or in a stupor by the river bank, and he would curse all who came near him. While no one came close to him even in his good times, in his bad fits all fled from him, and even Prue, with pinched and stricken face, set his food out upon the stone of the threshold as if he were a wild dog, and watched fearfully to see if he would come to fetch it.

While there is ice at the heart of over-riding lovelessness, ice and a firm grasp of the ways of this world, with Giles a dark fire burned at the heart of his lovelessness, and the bitter sorrow of the man stung all who brushed past him as if they brushed past nettles. Men said there must be

some evil thing in his past which haunted him; or that the winter long ago when all his children died of the choking fever had left him weak in the head; but he was never seen in the churchyard near the row of little stones, nor was he ever known to speak of them. Unless mumbling or roaring in his drunks, he was seldom known to speak at all. It was as if he lived removed from all the comings and goings of men, from the births and deaths, the simple friendships and the lasting loves, the shared hearthfires in the winter, posies picked and brought home by a small hand, songs sung in comradeship, shared vigils, shared labor, all the fabric of the common lot. He lived removed also from all pettiness; he did not stoop to try to gain another penny beyond that for which he labored; he cared nothing for what men thought; he had few wants; he never went out of his way, even in his drunken fits, to harm anyone. But all men, good and bad, rich and poor, were cast on the other side of a locked and bolted door. His wife, Prue, he tolerated merely, as he did the mug he drank from and the cot he slept on. And the glance of his eye or the lift of his hand had such bitterness behind them that the threatened blow was almost felt. He scorned even the rudiments of faith, and at his worst times Prue had even heard him curse God.

So thick and heavy the years of misery had become, Prue could hardly think back to how it had been in the beginning: He was a tall lad, dark with already more than a hint of moodiness. He had come out of the city as an apprentice to her father, and said only that he had no family. She was a quiet little thing, soft-hearted and eager to mend and comfort, disliking the bold self-confidence of the lads

she knew. Her father warned her and refused to help him, sensing a danger in him. But she was caught by his loneliness, and thought somehow to bring merriness into his face, and a free ring to his voice. So they had married and settled in Drury, sought work, and somehow all her hopes had withered. As her little ones died, in her own heaviness she could not ease him, and his darkness drove all fellowship from their door.

When summer fell upon the countryside, sweetening the air with scent and sound, softening the edges of the landscape, filling the days with the labor of field and flock, Prue's heart lifted a bit. From her garden work she would find herself glancing up the road, and if anyone passed she would sit back on her heels to watch, an unaccustomed quiver of hope at her heart, for what she did not know. Or she would leave off stirring the kettle to lean in the doorway, dreaming. But Giles was winterbound all seasons, and really the lovelier the earth, the more likely his fits to come upon him.

This summer, as of old, Prue had struggled with the little quiver of hope. In her rare trips to the village she had glanced at each face as if she sought someone. She looked for a sign of friendship, but the stigma of Giles was too strong upon her. She even took a fresh-killed fowl to an ailing woman on the other side of the woods, but the astonished embarrassment of the woman frightened her. What do they care for us! she thought. Even if I gave away everything, no one would really care. Men are hard. Only the earth is pure. And she wept a little, out of her dead hopes and weariness.

SHE HAD WAKENED that morning before dawn, the old quiver of hope deep within her like the first stirrings of an unborn child. Restless, she had crept out of bed and hung in the window to watch the east slowly fill with light, the pale curving road emerge, the blackness of the woods recede. To wake before the dawn and watch the day come forth out of creation made that day somehow like a jewel in the hand. Now, mid morning, she knelt in the berry patch, weeding, the sun hot on her back, her fingers stained, her heart bruised, and the wonder and the waiting of the dawn all but drained away. Giles had wakened in a foul mood, and not touching porridge or milk had gone off wordless to his work; the look in his eyes had made her sick, half with a hopeless sorrow for him and half with fear. Now in spite of herself and in spite of the years of such mornings, the tears fell on the berry leaves and she wiped her face with her sleeve more than once; and into her mind there crept at last an amazement that still within her there could glow that tiny flicker of hope which was at once her pain and her only joy. She wondered what it could mean, that always it refused to die, to glimmer out, to be quite quenched. For what, for whom, did she hope and wait? Surely for no mortal comfort, no earthly change.

She sank back on her heels, brushing the hair from her eyes, conscious that over the familiar morning sounds of the little homestead there was a pleasant chatter and stir along the road. Over the rise of the old stone bridge was coming a troop of children, with a tall stranger in the midst of them. They came slowly, evidently listening to a story, at intervals breaking in with comments or laughter.

She knew some of them dimly as village children, but others she did not know. Around the troop in circles ran three or four dogs, leaping, coming in to push under the stranger's hand, but never barking. About them all there seemed to gather a brightness lighter than the sunlight, a joyful air, a warmth that refreshed and did not oppress. Prue knelt there transfixed, watching them come, a strange thudding in her breast; she put her hand over her mouth to keep from calling out, though why or what she would have called she did not know. Somehow she felt she must stop them, hold them, receive from them, or join them. They neared the gate, and were passing when a small boy suddenly detached himself from the stranger's side, pushed through the gate, and ran towards her. He carried in his hand a gourd. In front of her he paused with a merry face. "May I have some fresh water from your well, for the man to drink, if you please?"

Unsteadily Prue rose, took the gourd to the well and filled it, and brought it to the boy. He took it from her hands with a smile, and ran back between the flowerbeds to the gate. The troop had paused a moment and now the stranger stopped, taking the gourd. Across the cornflowers and the berry vines he looked at her, and the only sound was the steady hum of bees and the ripple of a wren's song from the lilac bush. The air was luminous and still. Prue stood and took that look, while her heart thudded and a mist swam over her and the palms of her clasped hands became moist and clammy. Then while she watched, tranced, he drank, hung the gourd at his belt, and the troop moved on. Down the road they went and into

The Sparrow

the woods, singing, and she watched them until they had quite gone, and listened until that last faint golden note had died. But the brightness...the brightness had not died!

IN THE COOL, new-made morning, with the dew winking on leaf and flower, Giles stood in the door, having woken unrefreshed, sore at heart, time stale within him. The bed of four-o'clocks beside the door with deep green shiny leaves and tight-fisted pink flowers had slung upon it a spider-web, unflawed and spangled. It struck at him as he stared at it; again he was engulfed with the useless blank of his own life, the snaggle and snarl of his own self, when a simple low creature could spin such a gem of creation! As Prue came in from the hen house, six white eggs gathered in her apron, he was already on the path, no word or glance for her, the black look on his face, and no breakfast under his belt. Down the road he went, habit taking him to the shop, but within him iron bands tightening, tightening, and the black mood of hate descending.

Once at work he hung over his bench, hardly conscious of the stir and bustle around him. The shop opened directly on the street, the doors flung wide for air and light in the summer warmth. Across the narrow cobbled way was the yard of the Black Pigeon, where urchins flipped stones in the dust. Peddlers came and went, and an old man dozed on a bench in the shade. The casement windows of the inn were wide, the old thick doors set ajar; there was a pleasant sound of voices now and then from within, and the pleasant smell of bean pottage and roasting meat.

As the heat of day increased, Giles moved his bench closer to the doors. At the back of the shop there was a great pounding and hammering on the roomy wagon frame for a prosperous farmer of an outlying district. Giles was working on the great wheels, a small pile of finished spokes beside him, and a pile of rough sticks behind him. He picked up a fresh one, secured it, seized the spoke-shave, and on the first stroke struck a knot and split the wood. With a curse he flung it on the rubbish pile, and as he did so his eye took in the innyard.

He had been dimly aware that the pleasant sounds and bustle had taken on a new note. But he was now struck by a curious brightness, as if the sun had shifted. He saw a knot of children and knew the sound had been their laughter and talk. They were gathered around the bench where the old man, now awake, had dozed. A stranger sat there, quite a young man, his face half hidden by the children but his large deft hands visible as he whittled and worked away at an old piece of wood. Little by little there emerged from the wood a duck, which when finished was handed to the most ragged child. Another gathered scrap of wood was offered and, with much delight from the children, this time a little dog with pointed ears came forth and was seized with eager hands. As the third piece was offered for transformation, Giles felt, like a touch of light, the stranger's eyes upon him, and he sullenly shifted back to his work, his heart strangely sore again, the hopeless black like a cloud around him. This time he struck another knot and his thumb slipped and was cut. He cursed again, sucked it, wiped it on his tunic, and labored on. But the

wood was flawed, and he flung it away also. The next piece he cut too close. The next piece, with much labor, came right, and was laid on the good pile. He ventured another glance at the stranger, and met a level look that pierced his heart. There was a strange thudding in his chest, the spokeshave clattered from his hand, he rose blindly and stumbled across the cobbles, through the innyard, past the cluster of children who hushed as he went by, the stranger quiet in their midst. Into the dark door he plunged, through the hall, to the bar, where he pounded and shouted for ale.

When he came out, a good hour later, the children and the strange man were gone. Foggy with ale on an empty stomach, uncaring what he did, Giles staggered across the cobbles to the shop, back to his bench. He stopped, swaying, clutching the doorframe. By his bench there lay, instead of a pile of rough sticks, a neat stack of perfect spokes. All the shavings had been swept away, and his spokeshave hung on its accustomed nail. All this Giles took in with swimming eyes, as he stood there, the sound of his own breathing heavy in the still noon air. Then with a curse he wheeled and went off down the road, through the town, out the other way and not towards home. The very dogs cowered away from him as he went, and the good wives shook their heads and clicked their tongues in pity and dismay as they saw him.

PAST AFTERNOON, THE SHADOW of the hedges stretched halfway across the road; wren and thrush were silent for a while in the heat, but a few brown sparrows fluttered their wings in the cool dust where a puddle had

long since dried. Giles, who had lain under a bridge for an hour or so in a drunken sleep till roused by the rattle of a wagon over the wooden slats, now wandered back to the road, not knowing or caring which way he went. He carried a stick, the feel of wood in the hand being a habit with him. He walked head down, hunched, aimless. He tried to press from his mind all thought, all feeling, to hold on to the merciful blankness in which there was no pain; but the old trick of obliviousness, which had served him in its fashion for so long, could not withstand the little prick of memory, the look of large brown fingers putting the wooden duck into the hands of a dirty child, the pile of spokes by his bench, the brightness in the air of the innyard. Creation around him cried God's praise, the simple deed of love awaited his hand; oh, when had evil drowned him? Where had the wrong road begun, with no way back and thick poisonous woods closing in behind? He was the outcast, God's forgotten one!

His hand lifted then, for as if in a dream he saw the sparrow in the dust; the stick flew unerringly; the sparrow fluttered and dropped, a small ruffled heap, its head awry. Giles stopped, staring at what he had done.

Then down the road, in a path of brightness as if out of a cloud's shadow the sun had moved again, he knew someone came. With a terrible effort he looked, and saw that it was the stranger, still far away, coming alone, at a steady pace. With a groan Giles dropped into the deep grass and crawled under the hedge. For a long moment he hid his face, but then as if compelled he raised his head. A strange thudding began in his chest, shaking

his frame. Down the road the stranger came; he walked steadily but he saw all that was around him, not like one intent on his own business. The curious brightness hung in the air about him. The thudding grew; Giles could not move except to tremble; his ears began to pound. Nearer came the stranger, and nearer. It was as if all of life hung and trembled in that instant; and in a mist Giles saw the stranger stop, with his eyes on the road. In the dust at his feet lay the dead sparrow. He stooped then, and gathered it up, cupping it against him in his two hands; and Giles, before the pounding in his ears quite overcame him, saw him stretch out his hands and open them; the bird fluttered and hopped upon his fingers, and flew away.

When sense came back to him, Giles sat up under the hedge. He felt weak and witless, scarcely knowing his own name. Then in an instant he scrambled up and into the road, searching around in the dust for the dead sparrow; but it was gone. Then he ran first this way and then that way up and down the road but saw no one. He stood there, filling his lungs with air, looking foolish, tears running down his cheeks, the tight bands across his heart parting one by one, the air bright and luminous about him, the cool of evening already stealing out of the wood. Then with a cry of joy he went stumbling across the fields, the quickest way home, to tell Prue.

STRUGGLE

The heart's winter,
the soul's drought,
the mind's ice
hardening out,
the deep clutch
of circumstance,
the numbed spirit
in a trance...

Oh break! Oh break

fire in the east,
that we may rise,
that we may wake.

J. T. C.



This is a preview. Get entire book here.

The Storm

IN A CERTAIN VILLAGE that lay on the banks of a river in the midlands of old England, there lived three brothers. The oldest was the ferryman, the next the miller, and the third the forester of the lord's forest, which bordered the village on the north. So they were all men of some consequence and importance, and were prosperous for those times, having plenty to eat, steady work, tidy houses, and a degree of independence. But the ferryman never sang at his work, as ferrymen are supposed to do; and the miller was not the jolly miller the songs tell us of, so that it was no pleasure to take one's grain to be ground; and the forester tended the beautiful woods with an unseeing and uncaring heart. None had wives to cheer their days, nor dogs to keep them company, nor even a cat to purr on the hearth of a winter evening.

The lord of the fief was a just and temperate man who never taxed unfairly and who lived at peace with his neighbors. But since he was away at the king's court most of the

year, he saw to it that he had trustworthy men as bailiff and steward and warden of his lands. He knew the three brothers and trusted them each one to treat all fairly—the ferryman to charge a fair toll and guard the fishing rights on the river, the miller to keep the fair amount of grain for the lord’s granaries and to return the just amount to the people, and the forester to guard the forest well, both timber and wildlife, and to deal with poachers with firmness yet with humanity.

So the life of the village went on for a long time, and the three brothers lived from day to day and year to year; their hair grayed a bit and their shoulders grew a little stooped, but they were still hale and strong and did not feel the dampness knotting their knee joints nor their breath growing short when they worked. They never thought about the future or the past but took each day as it came. Once a week on Sundays and on feast days the forester would leave his hut and travel to the mill, and together he and the miller would go by the path along the river to the ferryman, and together the three of them would go wordlessly to church, and after that to the inn to sit in silence over venison pie and a flagon of ale; and then they would go off again, parting with the ferryman first, and then back along the river, where the forester would leave the miller and go on to his solitary, snug hut on the forest’s edge.

So it went on, and might have gone on to the end of their days. But they, all unwitting, had not been forgotten, and they, unseeking, yet were being sought for.

For there was a night toward the end of harvest one year when the great storm came. For three days the air had

been heavy and dark, and strange white seabirds were seen over the inland meadows, and nights were hushed and dull, the lively crickets silent and the leaves hanging still. The boys who were accustomed to romp on the common hung about their own cottages, and the little lads and lasses clung to their mothers' skirts in a feeling of nameless fear.

On the third night the tempest descended, first with a whirling of clouds in the upper air, and a southing in the tree tops, so all fled indoors. And then with the dark came the full fury of wind and rain. The blackness was utter and complete, and each man, no matter how strong, felt his own puniness, and a clutch of fear before the unknown.

Now the forester, during those storm-haunted days, walked through his woods and marked in his mind the dead and dying trees that might topple in a great wind, and he noted how still the beasts were, and how hidden and silent all the birds. He noted the soundness of his little, low, snug hut huddled at the edge of the forest, and was glad that he had built it of stone; but he regretted that he had not long since felled a great dead beech that stood a hundred yards from his door.

So it was that the night the storm broke he sat within, the dim glow of the embers on his hearth and the light of one candle on the table throwing shadows that veered and flickered on the walls. He crouched in fear and dread, listening to the tumult without; and he thought of his trees, and the beasts of the forest who would find little shelter, and he thought of his brothers and how they were faring, and at length he thought of the people of his village, in their flimsy cottages, with their meager harvest

unprotected. A little surge of pity crept into his heart; and in that instant he heard the child crying.

At first he did not know what it was he heard, over the howling of the wind and the pounding of the rain. But then it came again, faint and clear—the crying of a child. He rose and went to the door and stood with his hand on the latch.

“I cannot go out there,” he thought. “I would be blown away, or crushed beneath a falling limb. I am an old man. And what child would be abroad now? Have I lost my wits?”

But even as he whispered to himself, the cry came again; and after it there was a great crash, the long, thundering roar of a tree falling, and he knew the great beech had gone. He waited, frozen, straining his ears, but no further cry came. Then he waited no longer, but flung open the door, pulling it to behind him, and plunged into the tempest in the direction of the fallen tree; through the raging dark he went, gasping and struggling, until he ran into the sprawling branches. Then on his knees he crawled, feeling with his hands along the ground, under the great prostrate trunk, and calling, “Little one, little one! Where are you? I am here to help! Little one, answer me!”

After an agony of searching, his hands felt a small, wet face, and his palm felt the fluttering beat of a small heart. The child lay pinned under a limb. He began to pull and tug at the limb, and taking his knife from his belt he began to hack away, gently easing the little body free as he worked. It was as if a strange glow surrounded him, for he could see in the dark; and as he slid the little one free and

