

A SUMMER
WINDFALL

VIRNA SHEARD

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A Summer Windfall

By Virna Sheard

It was an August morning, hot and still, with a stillness one could almost feel. The birds lost heart as the hours wore on towards noon, and puffing themselves into small, ruffled balls of quivering feathers, perched in silence among the leaves of the great elm tree that shadowed Hester Stonewell's house. A magnificent tree it was, strong and mighty of limb, the like of which did not grow for miles around in that flat, unbroken country, but to-day its notched leaves hung fainting and it seemed to watch the sky and listen.

Down in a corner of the homely garden some self-sown sunflowers raised their golden heads cheerily to the god of day, and a cluster of white and yellow butterflies danced madly above them. A woman came to the doorway, and shading her eyes with one worn hand, gazed across the lot at the long roadway that wound like a rusty ribbon east and west as far as sight could reach. She stood thus for a few moments, her shoulders drooping, as though they wearied under some unseen burden, her compressed lips and faded eyes wearing an expression of hopeless self-repression and dull quiet. One could not easily have told her age, for it was not time that had aged her. Perhaps her face had been beautiful before the light and color went out of it, for even now the features were striking, and her well poised head was crowned by heavy waves of dark red hair that glittered in the sun with streaks of silver.

“It's six days since any one's turned off here,” she said, half aloud. “Time enough to die and be buried; but from that dust yonder, looks like there was some one comin' now, an' I reckon the horse'll want water to-day.” After watching with strange eagerness till the traveller came in view, she suddenly gave a short, bitter laugh.

“His Reverence,” she said; “His Reverence,” and going in, closed the door.

Presently a man rode up, fastened his horse at the fence and walked swiftly up to the house. He was a young fellow of splendid build, clad as to his upper half in most pronounced clerical clothing, but with his legs encased in close-fitting riding leggings. He knocked with his short whip gently, then waited, whistling a bar of “Pull for the Shore” in sweet, breezy tones.

After a time the door was opened, slowly, as by one reluctant to allow him so much grace. The man smiled a gay, youthful smile, and lifted his black shovel-hat, revealing thereby a crop of short blond curls. Holding out his hand, he stepped into the room uninvited, speaking in a ringing boyish voice:

“I’ve been an age getting around here, haven’t I, Mrs. Stonewell? You see the Bishop has given me such a sweep, rather, I should say, such a tremendous circuit, and there’s been a lot of illness back there in town. Really, I’ve had a service at the cemetery every day for two weeks. Will you be good enough to let me have a drink? There’s no such well as yours for miles; I’ve been thinking of it coming along.”

The woman had given him an unresponsive hand in greeting and then beckoned him to a chair. Now she turned to leave the room. “I’ll bring you a drink,” she answered; “the water has only been up a little while. It’ll be cold, I guess.”

“Thanks, awfully,” said the curate. “I’ll look after John Brown presently. He’s too hot just now—.” Catching her eye he nodded towards the horse. “I named him after the man whose soul goes marching on, you know. He seems to have been a very popular fellow; they never tire of singing about him here in America.”

She disappeared, and he wrinkled his smooth forehead and drew a long breath, as he wondered: “Whatever’s a fellow to start off with? Can’t think what’s best to say. I never saw such an unapproachable person. She won’t give me a cue, poor soul, poor soul! Well, I’ll just read a bit and there’s always the collect for the day. Oh, thanks,” he said, as his hostess entered, holding out a heavy mug of sparkling water. “If you’d ridden eight miles in such horrible heat you’d know how good this is.”

“It *is* hot,” she assented. “Feels like a storm might come up.”

“Regular cyclone weather,” he responded, flicking the dust off his boots. “They tell me so at least. I’m new to the climate, you know.”

Then there was silence. The man stirred uneasily as the situation grew more difficult.

“May I read a little to you before I go on, Mrs. Stonewell?” he asked, hesitatingly. “I may find some verse—or—or—line that you have overlooked, and sometimes even to hear another voice repeating the words, so blessed, so true, is a sort of help, isn’t it?”

“There’s the Bible,” she answered, “you can read if you’ve a mind to. I don’t ever open it or touch it, it wouldn’t do me any good; I need more’n verses or words to heal my heart, Mr. Cuthbert.”

The man turned to the window that looked out on the shadowy tree. A little table stood near, on which lay an old-fashioned family Bible. The dust was heavy upon its gilded cover, heavy and gray. The rest of the room shone with an almost painful cleanliness. Here was something that spoke to him louder than words, and he found no courage to raise the lid.

“I’m sorry,” he faltered, “awfully sorry you feel that way; maybe you’d let me say a prayer, then; a short one, for I don’t feel as though I’ve any other kind of comfort to offer you. I’d rather do something for you, Mrs. Stonewell, than just talk.”

She smiled a white, flickering smile. “Oh, there ain’t nothing to *be* said, I guess. You can pray if you’ve a mind to—I don’t pray no more. It wouldn’t do me no good. It wouldn’t give me the children back, nor the baby, nor Jack. You say God took them, an’ I reckon he wanted them; well, so did I, more’n he did likely. If he’d just left *one*—the baby—maybe I’d a felt different.”

There came a hard sob in her voice, which she checked. “I ain’t got to the place where I can go down on my knees and thank him for it; not yet,” she said. “We’d only got this house paid for an’ fixed up. We’d worked pretty hard, Jack an’ me. Then come the fever an’ took them. I ain’t never seen what I was left for, nor the farm; it would have been better,” with a broken laugh, “if a cyclone had come along an’ made a clean sweep.”

Young Cuthbert rose to go and stood looking down into the rebellious face with troubled eyes.

“I’m sorry for you, Hester Stonewell,” he said; “your case is beyond me. It is more one for the Bishop, I fancy. I wish to heaven you had had something left, then perhaps I could have found a word to give you; as it is I

fear I can't. Still, in my heart I *know*, most truly, that whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth."

The woman answered nothing, but watched him mount and ride on his way towards the next town, which lay some six miles west.

It was a dull and solitary road he took, and as he turned and waved a good-by at her, she vaguely wondered what had compelled him to his work,—the work of trying to bring hope to forlorn souls, to save some, perchance. He had told her once that he went in and out amongst men chiefly—that he was no clerical visitor—but tried to befriend the rough settlers and young fellows who were opening out this new country; that he waged war upon their drinking saloons and gambling houses, and in his own words, "gave the lads a hand up."

He was such a fine fellow, so honest of face, so cheery of heart, surely they could have found a place for him in their army or navy over there in England where he belonged, she thought; but to labor for the church here in a new land—a western prairie land—burying the dead, smiling that comforting smile of his into the eyes of the living, those whose hearts were hard with suffering like her own. Oh, where was his compensation? she asked herself. What was the reason he cared? So thoughts of him drifted through her mind, changing for a little the monotony of its bent.

She sat down wearily on the top step and looked across at the long road, for the house stood many acres back. No wagon nor foot traveller drew in sight. All was a hot, unbroken stillness. The air quivered up through the short burnt grass, the sky burned with a strange electric blue, like heated steel. Beside the door stood some stiff hollyhocks, and the light filtered red and glowing through their crimson bells. A sense of aching loneliness crept over her; it grew till it felt tangible, a something she could almost lift or sweep away with her hands, like a suffocating veil. It caught her breath.

Once she started, thinking she heard a voice, a clear boy's voice calling across the fields—calling—calling. Again she turned her head quickly, for surely there sounded a light footfall in the room beyond. Such tricks her fancy played her. Now and then, as the hours passed, she drew her hands swiftly over her eyes. Each time it was to brush away a vision. For it seemed that she saw the figure of a baby, unsteady on his little dimpled legs. He toddled down towards the knot of nodding sunflowers, his pretty head shining golden-red in the glittering light, his thin, white pinafore fluttering behind, his small feet showing pink on the brown pathway,—pink, like the pearly side of a shell.

Sometimes a shiver passed over her as though a cold wind, that stirred no leaf nor lightest flower near, had blown on her and chilled her through and through. The clock inside struck two; she had forgotten the hour, but now rose stiffly and turned to go in. A strange closeness was in the air, it made her faint. Then she noticed that the light was failing. The sun was being turned down by some mighty hand, as we turn down a lamp. Holding by the lintel of the door she looked to the east. Away—far and far away on the horizon, rolling in like a wave, came a great cloud. Still she clung there and waited. Soon it came—an Egyptian blackness, and with it a thousand furies of the stormwind!

The cyclone! more swift and awful than the sweep of a tidal wave. Yet through the roar and horrible darkness of it, she lived on, feeling sure that some way its strength had not quite reached her, that the worst force of it had been spent beyond, that she and the little homestead were on the outside of it all, and not in the dreadful centre track. After the wind passed came the sweep of rain, the continuous flash of lightning and crashing of thunder, which gradually rolled farther and farther away.

A few hours before she had said that it would have been better if they had all gone together, she and her husband and children. That she would have been glad if they had all been launched into eternity on the breath of some such storm. After the partial calm came, she knew she had not spoken the truth. Terror had taught her so much.

The house rocked and the trees swayed and groaned long after light began to creep over the earth again. She wondered vaguely if the town, two miles east, had been swept away, if it were better to go and find out the worst, but her heart failed her at the thought. She wandered about the solitary, drenched, beaten-down garden like one who walks in her sleep.

About five o'clock a man came along the main road on a sorry looking mule. He stopped and stared at the house, then suddenly struck over towards it. Hester Stonewell ran down the wagon path to meet him.

“Yer all right then, mistress?” he called out as he came. “Guess you must have been on the outside edge of it!”

“Yes, yes,” she answered, trembling. “I’m all right. It went past, but beyond there, the town; it was straight in the track, wasn’t it?”

“Straight,” he said, “plumb straight. It’s blew to kingdom come! There ain’t no town there now, mistress, none worth mentioning, for it’s strew out over these ten miles, long and thin.” He gave a ghastly chuckle that froze her

heart. "I've seen storms in my day," he went on meditatively, leaning over the thin mule's side, "an' I've see water-spouts! havin' been a seafarin' man, an' I've see what they called a cyclone before, but anything like this I never see! I reckon the lightning come down about the forkedest it ever *did* come in these parts. It seemed like a day o' judgment—that's so. Why!" he continued, waving one arm, "it blew the feathers off hens and the horns off cows, mistress! Solemn truth. Where yon town stood last night is death and destruction now."

Then casting a sweeping glance around, he suddenly pointed an unsteady hand towards one of the fields.

"Ain't there something caught beyond there, some bundle or basket—see?"

The woman shaded her eyes; she had listened to him unheedingly before. "Yes," she said,—“yes, I see something; it's caught in our clump of thorn trees. I'll go over and find what it is; then I'll walk to Bilbary. There might be work for me to help with.”

"Well, I'm follerin' up the storm, so good-by to you; there ain't many come off as lucky as we two."

The dilapidated mule ambled onward and Hester ran over the fields to the white stunted thorn bushes. A wild trembling seized her as she neared them and saw it was a cradle, a light willow cradle, that was fastened so strangely there. She turned it quickly over, for the hood was firmly caught. Inside, safely held from harm, tied in by a soft knitted scarf, lay a year old baby. He had been crying, for his rosy face was still wet, but had gone off to sleep again and slumbered there quiet and unharmed. Some mother had fastened him in with the pliant scarf, winding it across and across the cradle; perhaps it was to prevent his climbing out and getting a heavy fall when he awoke. So the woman thought, for many a time had she made her own little ones secure in like fashion. She gazed at him wonderingly—this wee voyager who had ridden safely on the back of the awful gale till he brought to anchor in a white thorn tree. O strange fate and mystery of life!

She raised him sleeping and carried him onward towards the wrecked town.

"Ah!" she thought. "His mother—all in wild desperation and panic—might be seeking him now;" and then her feet flew onward more swiftly, for she knew—none better—what such a mother would feel.

The long road was strewn with the storm's *débris*, and when she reached what had been the busy town of Bilbary no single building seemed to be left standing whole. It was a sad and sorry sight; people moved hither and thither in the fading light with wavering, uncertain movements, as though their very wits were unsettled. She stopped one and another, and showing the child, asked and implored them to tell her where she could find its mother; but no one paid much heed, they only looked at her with dazed and troubled eyes, answering at random, and with little apparent care. By and by she wandered down a street where some men were working about the ruins of a house. It was dark now and their lanterns flickered strangely, like will o' the wisps, from place to place. They were a search party, she knew.

A boy stood near by and she touched him lightly on the shoulder, asking the oft-repeated question with quivering lips.

"Bring yer light, Bill," he called to one of the men. Presently its yellow gleam shone on the baby's face. He opened his wondering eyes, dewy and sweet, and smiled, for he came straightway from the beautiful land of dreams. The boy gave a low whistle.

"Say! it's the kid, Billy," he said. "I told you you needn't hunt round here, for I saw the wicker cradle on the verander, and felt mighty sure it had just been took up and blown off somewheres. Why, it was light as a feather with him in it. I passed this place not ten minutes before the storm struck. Ned Hazleton was asleep in a chair, just inside the room, you could see him plain. S'pose he was thinking he was takin' care of the baby—poor fellow." The boy paused, then went on in a queer, rapid way: "Well, then, as I was goin' on I met Mrs. Ned—'bout a block away, I reckon. She was running jest as fast. 'There's goin' to be an awful storm,' I called, 'but you needn't rush at that pace! Ned's home with the baby.' She never even answered, but tore on. Then the darkness came straight down and I jest hung on to the ground—that's all—seemed as though the whole town went over me."

"Oh," cried Hester, looking into the faces around, "can't some of you tell me where his mother is now?"

"He ain't got no mother, missus," said one of the men in a husky voice; "leastwise we carried her out from under those rafters not twenty minutes ago; an' Ned was found jest before that, never knew what struck him, I reckon, he looked that calm; but she—poor little thing—she had a troubled look on her face." He stopped abruptly and glanced over his shoulder, as he touched the child gently on its soft face. "This here infant's an orphan," he said, "there ain't no more about it that I can see."

“But is there no one that he belongs to—are you *sure*—sure he is their child?” she cried; “there might be some mistake.”

“It’s Ned Hazleton’s baby all right enough,” answered another; “I knew the little chap well, and there was just the three of them, no folks in all America or the other side, that ever I heard of.”

“They are lying over there,” said the boy, “if you want to see them.”

She went across to the two still figures, and looked down at them so crushed and broken, with tear-blinded eyes. For her own bitter woes she had never wept, but here was something sadder, more awful.

“Shall I take the child home?” she asked the men eagerly. “Shall I take him?”

“There ain’t no one else claims him,” said one. “I reckon you can have him to keep, likely,” smiling grimly and lifting the baby’s dimpled chin with one great finger. “We’ve got work further along, boys; considerable work before this night’s over.”

So then Hester Stonewell turned her face homeward. She held the soft little body close against her heart and stilled him with tender words. Often she stumbled on the rough road, for she was over-weary.

It was next morning that the Rev. Charles Cuthbert rode again up to the lonely house. The garden was laid waste, but the tree stood serene and gracious and the sun shone in through the open door. He waited, looking in and listening, for Hester was rocking in a low chair, rocking and singing a lullaby. In her arms was the child and his curly head nestled against her face. From the great book on the table under the window the gray dust had all been wiped away and the gilt scroll-work on it glistened bravely. And seeing these things the man smiled, then turned noiselessly, mounted his horse and rode away.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *A Summer Windfall* by Virna Sheard]