# LAVENDER

*By Lizette Woodworth Reese*

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OLD JOHN DAVIS came along Southern Lane in the early dusk and stopped in front of the house nearest the churchyard. He stood a moment and stared across at it.

"I can smell them bushes out here," he said. "My! ain't they sweet!"

The crickets were making a good deal of noise in the short-cropped grass.

"How they do go on!" said the old man. "They make a body think of things."

He crossed to the gate and entered. A long, straight path led up to the little, sloping-roofed, shutterless house. It faced the rich yellow west, and its windows were the color of those of a cathedral. Thin eddies of dust floated about him as he went. A certain strict, sweet odor filled the air. It was so still, except for the insects, that his steps gave out an almost solemn sound upon the gravel.

"Is that you, Mr. Davis?"

He came to a halt: "Yes, it's me, Mis' Field."

A slender old woman came around the corner of the house and eyed him distantly for a moment. Her face was small and dark; her eyes were dark. A certain sustained breathlessness, as though that of expectancy, hung about her. "I seen you coming," she said briefly; "I guess you come for the lavender."

"Yes, Mis' Field, that's what I want." He followed her back to a grassy space hedged in on two sides by tall lavender bushes, brimming with their June spears of exquisite bloom. It was a cloistered spot, almost surrounded as it was by this delicately colored wall. In the middle of it stood a rude little table, partly covered with the blossomed stalks, some in scant bundles, some in loosened heaps. A ball of twine lay in the midst.

"Ain't it sweet?" said old John Davis. He sniffed and sniffed.

"How many you want?" asked Mrs. Field, pointing towards the bundles.

"I want six dozen, Mis' Field."

"I can't give you more'n five. I'm selling some myself this year. The minister's wife's buying it for her sheets."

He waved his hand towards the bushes: "You've got lots there in the hedge."

"I ain't going to touch another bit—not a speck! I'll give you five dozen and a half."

He sat down on a wooden chair by the door. "I wish you'd give me or sell me a root, Mis' Field. They're always asking about 'em in market. Susanna's just tired of answering."

She was coming towards him with her arms full of her scented wares. "I'm not going to dig up one of them bushes," she declared. "You and Susanna could have had a hedge as good as this if you'd kept at it. It can grow anywheres in Maryland."

"We don't have any luck with them cuttings you give us, Mis' Field. They won't grow, or else they come up fine and strong, and pindle down in the winter. It makes Susanna mad as fits."

"It ain't my fault," said Mrs. Field. "Here's your five dozen and a half." She put the blossoms into his upstretched hands. "You ask five cents a bunch for them stalks—you hear?"

"We always do," said the old man. "Lord, ain't they sweet!" He thrust his withered face down into them.

Mrs. Field looked at him with a curious hesitancy. "What kind—what kind of market did you have yesterday, Mr. Davis?" There was a secret and faltering eagerness in her voice.

"Oh, middling, middling. Folks want stuff for nothing these days. They want you to grow it, and dig it up, and cart it to town, and then just throw it at 'em when you get there. And if you ain't willing, they're ready to sass you. Them hucksters get all the profit."

The woman's face grew wistful in the waning light. "Nobody could sell better'n me when I wanted to," she said.

"That's so, Mis' Field. Susanna and me were just talking about it. We all thought it was a better chance for the rest of us when you give up your stall. How long ago was that, Mis' Field?"

"Ten year and more, Mr. Davis."

"It was that year we had them three hard frosts handrunning," said he; "it was when—when——"

"You mean when my Jean went away," said Mrs. Field.

The old man was abashed. "I didn't mean to bring up any of your troubles, Mis' Field," he blundered on.

She stood silent. The crickets seemed to grow louder and louder.

"Well." He rose and moved slowly away out of the sweet-smelling space. "Mis' Field!"—he had halted and was looking back,—"Mis' Field, why won't you sell us one of them lavender-roots?"

A flash like that of fire passed over her dark, tense face. And yet it seemed long before she spoke. "It's Jean," she said at last.

"Jean!" he said hazily.

"Yes, Jean, Jean!" She was fierce and remote and appealing all in one. "Jean, Mr. Davis! She helped to plant some of them eleven year ago." Then she seemed to falter beneath his wondering eyes. "And when she comes back—when she comes back, Mr. Davis, I want things to look like they did when she went."

"Yes, yes, Ma'am," he said.

"I feel sure she's coming back, Mr. Davis."

"Yes, Ma'am, maybe she will."

That flash came again. "She'll come back alive, or she'll come back dead, John Davis. I know she will!"

He lumbered away through the dusk without another word. She returned to her little table, and, taking up the loosened lavender, handful by handful, began tying it into bundles of uniform length and thickness. She worked mechanically, her fingers trembling a little. The half light, the strict odor, the memory-throbbing hour, were filled with the daughter that had faded out of her meagre life like the morning smoke. What mattered the rumor regarding her that still floated about among the narrow country folk after these long years? To her she was virgin still. To her she was young, kind, triumphant, set on the borders of perpetual spring.

"Oh Lord!" said Mrs. Field. It was half a cry, half a groan. She looked up. A glimmer of white struck her eye. "Who's that coming down through the graves?" she asked.

"Mrs. Field! Mrs. Field!" called a voice across the palings.

The old woman came slowly forward.

"I've just slipped down to smell your lavender," said the minister's wife. "How I love it!" She held her girlish face towards the delicate lilac bloom. "I wonder if you won't sell me just one little root, Mrs. Field. I'd like to try it in my garden."

"I ain't going to part with one of them roots, Mis' Bowden. But I'll give you some cuttings, if you want me."

"Oh, thank you. I'm just wild to do something with that garden. We've been here a month, and we haven't seen a flower in it yet. It's nothing but grass and bushes. The last pastor was a widower." Her little, tinkling laugh sent a sudden music through the dusk. "There are three laurel-bushes and six althea-bushes and a whole side full of rosebushes that look as peaked as though the chickens had been after them. And the buds are all streaked with brown, like marble cake." She laughed again. "How long has that hedge been growing, Mrs. Field?"

"Some of it's twenty year old, maybe more. The last I planted was eleven year ago."

Mrs. Bowden drew a long breath. "How dear and old-timey and straggly it is! Now if my cuttings grow,—and you must show me how

to manage them, Mrs. Field,—I'll be the proudest woman in the world. And when you sit in church and smell the blossoms, they'll be so sweet you'll think it your own lavender, and not mine at all."

"I don't go to church," said Mrs. Field.

On one side of the fence rose the graves, very distinct in the clear yellow of the west, and beyond them the church, distinct and dark. On the other stood the narrow old house, a side window one sheet of quiet radiance. The hedge looked dim and cloud-like, and seemed to float away into the softened space. Beyond the hedge stretched acre after acre of market-garden, whose already furrowed levels were filling with phantom mist, and out of this ghostliness was blown a primeval aroma that could be subtly detected under that of the lavender.

"I don't go to church," repeated Mrs. Field. "I got tired of hearing preachers talk about Mary Magdalenes and the thief on the cross. You'd think there was only two kinds of commandments that ever got broke."

Mrs. Bowden looked rather vague. "I guess everybody gets tired of preaching sometime," she said. Then she laughed. It seemed easy for her to do so.

"Most all my folks were shouting Methodists," said Mrs. Field. "Mr. Field was too. You could hear him down on the pike. But I ain't got any use for them now. They worry too much about sinners. They're plenty where he's gone now." She waved a hand towards the churchyard.

"I've heard he was a good man," said Mrs. Bowden.

"He could have been worse," said Mrs. Field.

In the sudden wind that drove along the garden spaces it seemed as though the whole of life went by in one great breath of rich, heart-breaking, poignant odor. It was memory and expectation and the pulsing core of all. Then silence. A star or two had come out.

"They're calling me," said Mrs. Bowden. "Good-night, Mrs. Field. I want my lavender bunches to-morrow, mind you. Four bunches to each sheet. Can you remember?"

"I'll have them ready, Mis' Bowden. Good-night."

Her neighbor gone, Mrs. Field stood a moment gazing out into the churchyard. If she had put her hand over the sunken palings, she could have touched her husband's tombstone. He had been a hard man. A certain rigidity of conduct had brought him an enviable reputation, which, after his death, had ripened and mellowed into that of the saint. Some fleeting recollections of their early youth, when they had both lived away from the neighborhood, came into his wife's mind. Then some later and keener ones that roused and stung her. All at once she spoke out sharply. "You helped to drive her to it, John Field, and then, just like a man, you had to go and die, and leave me to bear it."

Her voice rang out, pelting the air as though with stones. "Sinner, sinner, sinner!"

She went back to her humble task of tying the lavender stalks, but the light grew dimmer, the yard began to melt away into the gathering darkness, and presently she flung her apron over the unfinished heap on the little table and looked around and about her. "I wonder if she'll come," she said. An added breathlessness took possession of her. Her body appeared to strain forward in an attitude of almost painful watchfulness. "I wonder if she'll come to-night," she repeated.

A slight sound reached her ears.

"It's that curtain flapping up in her room," she said. "I guess I'd better go up and fix it."

It was a small, low-roofed room, with a bare floor and whitewashed walls, so clean withal that its cleanliness seemed like a kind of poetry. Strips of faded homemade carpet lay across the uneven boards. The bed was covered with a white knitted quilt. On a table alongside sat a fluted glass filled with blossomed lavender. The lighted candle Mrs. Field held in her hand showed all this and much more. The whole chamber was full of memories, regrets, visions, the dreams that come but once and are so quick to fleet away; of passions, and longings, of spring-time echoes and odors, of gay, lilting, immortal youth. The dignity, the illusiveness of a secret was in the air.

"Oh Lord! Oh Lord!" cried old Mrs. Field. A tremor passed over her. She closed the window with unsteady fingers and went downstairs.

Out in the lane each tree was a soft, blurred black, behind which stretched the distant and exquisite west. The road itself was a half-blotted track. There were the old, shrill noises in the hidden grass.

Mrs. Field came out to her front-door. "Jean," she called softly.

It seemed to her, so sharp was her longing, that the girl must rise up before her out of the brooding dark. All her hopes, her desires, her schemes, her ambitions, had resolved themselves into that one cry of her forlorn heart. She had given up church, market, friends, all the petty but absorbing threads of a country life, and lived eleven lonely years in a lonely house that she might be at home whenever Jean returned. Against that hour the chamber had been kept ready, the garden pruned and tended in the old fashion. There should be nothing new, nothing accusing and strange.

"Jean," and her voice struck into the dusk with a passion that was like a flame, "if you're alive or if you're dead, come back!"

A step came faltering along the lane outside.

"Jean!"

There was no answer.

Old Mrs. Field went swiftly down the gravel path, her pale skirts floating about her like clouds.

"Jean!" She was speaking as though to a very little child. "Do you smell the lavender? There's hundreds of bunches on them old bushes. I've put some up in the crinkly glass you like so, and set it by your bed. Everything's the same, Jean, the quilt and the chairs and the rugs you and me made."

The step began to draw nearer.

"I knew you'd come back, Jean, I've been waiting. There's only you and me now. Your father's dead."

The gusts came and the boughs rocked against the far golden sky. The stars throbbed. The crickets were enough to break one's heart.

"Jean! Jean!"

There was no answer.

Mrs. Field ran out into the road, groping blindly before her with outstretched hands.

"Jean, do you hear me? do you hear me? I want to tell you something. I'm not any better than you, not one bit better. Jean, listen. Don't you know me and your father had to get married, and that was the reason he was hard on me, though you were his child as well as mine? I won't throw up old times to you, Jean. Don't you believe me? Jean! Jean!"

A halting figure came out of the pale darkness and swayed towards the garden gate.

"Jean!" cried old Mrs. Field.

## CHIMES

BY WILL McCOURTIE

CHIMES! Oh, the chimes!
Oh, the softness and the silveriness of chimes!
The limpid and the liquid running rhymes,
Hanging so vibrant in the crystal clear,
Sun-warmed, and hushful Sunday atmosphere!
From temple-top and spindling spire
They flow and follow and float,
White-winging higher and higher,
Until each pealing, healing note
Makes home at last, borne heaven high,
The very stars of music's sky,
Softened and singing silver chimes!
Chimes! Chimes! Chimes! Chimes!