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Jane Field A Novel

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Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman
Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany
ISBN: 978-3-8424-8516-7

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Chapter I

Amanda Pratt's cottage-house was raised upon two banks above the road-level. Here and there the banks showed irregular patches of yellow-green, where a little milky-stemmed plant grew. It had come up every spring since Amanda could remember.

There was a great pink-lined shell on each side of the front doorstep, and the path down over the banks to the road was bordered with smaller shells. The house was white, and the front door was dark green, with an old-fashioned knocker in the centre.

There were four front windows, and the roof sloped down to them; two were in Amanda's parlor, and two were in Mrs. Field's. She rented half of her house to Mrs. Jane Field.

There was a head at each of Amanda's front windows. One was hers, the other was Mrs. Babcock's. Amanda's old blond face, with its folds of yellow-gray hair over the ears and sections of the softly-wrinkled, pinky cheeks, was bent over some needle-work. So was Mrs. Babcock's, darkly dim with age, as if the hearth-fires of her life had always smoked, with a loose flabbiness about the jaw-bones, which seemed to make more evident the firm structure underneath.

Amanda was sewing a braided rug; her little veiny hands jerked the stout thread through with a nervous energy that was out of accord with her calm expression and the droop of her long slender body.

"It's pretty hard sewin' braided mats, ain't it?" said Mrs. Babcock.

"I don't care how hard 'tis if I can get 'em sewed strong," replied Amanda, and her voice was unexpectedly quick and decided. "I never had any feelin' that anything was hard, if I could only do it."

"Well, you ain't had so much hard work to do as some folks. Settin' in a rockin'-chair sewin' braided mats ain't like doin' the house-work for a whole family. If you'd had the cookin' to do for four men-folks, the way I have, you'd felt it was pretty hard work, even if you did make out to fill 'em up." Mrs. Babcock smiled, and showed that she did not forget she was company, but her tone was quite fierce.

"Mebbe I should," returned Amanda, stiffly.

There was a silence.

"Let me see, how many mats does that make?" Mrs. Babcock asked, finally, in an amiable voice.

"Like this one?"

"Yes."

"This makes the ninth."

Mrs. Babcock scrutinized the floor. It was almost covered with braided rugs, and they were all alike.

"I declare I don't see where you'll put another in here," said she.

"I guess I can lay 'em a little thicker over there by the what-not."

"Well, mebbe you can; but I declare I shouldn't scarcely think you needed another. I shouldn't think your carpet would wear out till the day of judgment. What made you have them mats all jest alike?"

"I like 'em better so," replied Amanda, with dignity.

"Well, of course, if you do there ain't nothin' to say; it's your carpet an' your mats," returned Mrs. Babcock, with grim apology.

There were two curious features about Amanda Pratt's parlor: one was a gentle monotony of details; the other, a certain savor of the sea. It was like holding a shell to one's ear to enter Amanda's parlor. There was a faint suggestion of far-away sandy beaches, the breaking of waves, and the rush of salt winds. In the centre of the mantel-shelf stood a stuffed sea-gull; on either side shells were banked. The fire-place was flanked by great branches of coral, and on the top of the air-tight stove there stood always in summer-time, when there was no fire, a superb nautilus shell, like a little pearl vessel. The corner what-not, too, had its shelves heaped with shells and coral and choice bits of rainbow lava from volcanic islands. Between the windows, instead of the conventional mahogany card-table, stood one of Indian lacquer, and on it was a little inlaid cabinet that was brought from over seas. The whole room in this little inland cottage, far beyond the salt fragrance of the sea, seemed like one of those marine fossils sometimes found miles from the coast. It indicated the presence of the sea in the lives of Amanda's race. Her

grandfather had been a seafaring man, and so had her father, until late in life, when he had married an inland woman, and settled down among waves of timothy and clover on her paternal acres.

Amanda was like her mother, she had nothing of the sea tastes in her nature. She was full of loyal conservatism toward the marine ornaments of her parlor, but she secretly preferred her own braided rugs, and the popular village fancy-work, in which she was quite skilful. On each of her chairs was a tidy, and the tidies were all alike; in the corners of the room were lambrequins, all worked after the same pattern in red worsted and beads. On one wall hung a group of pictures framed in cardboard, four little colored prints of crosses twined with flowers, and they were all alike. "Why didn't you get them crosses different?" many a neighbor had said to her—these crosses, with some variation of the entwining foliage, had been very popular in the rural neighborhood—and Amanda had replied with quick dignity that she liked them better the way she had them. Amanda maintained the monotony of her life as fiercely as her fathers had pursued the sea. She was like a little animal born with a rebound to its own track, from whence no amount of pushing could keep it long.

Mrs. Babcock glanced sharply around the room as she sewed; she was anxious to divert Amanda's mind from the mats. "Don't the moths ever git into that stuffed bird over there?" she asked suddenly, indicating the gull on the shelf with a side-wise jerk of her head.

"No; I ain't never had a mite of trouble with 'em," replied Amanda. "I always keep a little piece of camphor tucked under his wing feathers."

"Well, you're lucky. Mis' Jackson she had a stuffed canary-bird all eat up with 'em. She had to put him in the stove; couldn't do nothin' with him. She felt real bad about it. She'd thought a good deal of the bird when he was alive, an' he was stuffed real handsome, an' settin' on a little green sprig. She use to keep him on her parlor shelf; he was jest the right size. It's a pity your bird is quite so big, ain't it?"

"I s'pose he's jest the way he was made," returned Amanda shortly.

"Of course he is. I ain't findin' no fault with him; all is, I thought he was kind of big for the shelf; but then birds do perch on dreadful little places." Mrs. Babcock, full of persistency in exposing herself to rebuffs, was very sensitive and easily cowed by one. "Let me see—he's quite old. Your grandfather bought him, didn't he?" said she, in a mollifying tone.

Amanda nodded. "He's a good deal older than I am," said she.

"It's queer how some things that ain't of no account really in the world last, while others that's worth so much more don't," Mrs. Babcock remarked, meditatively. "Now, there's that bird there, lookin' jest as nice and handsome, and there's the one that bought him and brought him home, in his grave out of sight."

"There's a good many queer things in this world," rejoined Amanda, with a sigh.

"I guess there is," said Mrs. Babcock. "Now you can jest look round this room, an' see all the things that belonged to your folks that's dead an' gone, and it seems almost as if they was immortal instead of them. An' it's goin' to be jest the same way with us; the clothes that's hangin' up in our closets are goin' to outlast us. Well, there's one thing about it—this world ain't *our* abidin'-place."

Mrs. Babcock shook her head resolutely, and began to fold up her work. She rolled the unbleached cloth into a hard smooth bundle, with the scissors, thimble, and thread inside, and the needle quilted in.

"You ain't goin'?" said Amanda.

"Yes, I guess I must. I've got to be home by half-past five to get supper, an' I thought I'd jest look in at Mis' Field's a minute. Do you s'pose she's to home?"

"I shouldn't wonder if she was. I ain't seen her go out anywhere."

"Well, I dun'no' when I've been in there, an' I dun'no' but she'd think it was kinder queer if I went right into the house and didn't go near her."

Amanda arose, letting the mat slide to the floor, and went into the bedroom to get Mrs. Babcock's bonnet and light shawl.

"I wish you wouldn't be in such a hurry," said she, using the village formula of hospitality to a departing guest.

"It don't seem to me I've been in much of a hurry. I've stayed here the whole afternoon."

Suddenly Mrs. Babcock, pinning on her shawl, thrust her face close to Amanda's. "I want to know if it's true Lois Field is so miserable?" she whispered.

"Well, I dun'no'. She don't look jest right, but she an' her mother won't own up but what she's well."

"Goin' the way Mis' Maxwell did, ain't she?"

"I dun'no'. I'm worried about her myself—dreadful worried. Lois is a nice girl as ever was."

"She ain't give up her school?"

Amanda shook her head.

"I shouldn't think her mother'd have her."

"I s'pose she feels as if she'd got to." Mrs. Babcock dropped her voice still lower. "They're real poor, ain't they?"

"I guess they ain't got much."

"I s'pose they hadn't. Well, I hope Lois ain't goin' down. I heard she looked dreadful. Mis' Jackson she was in yesterday, talkin' about it. Well, you come over an' see me, Mandy. Bring your sewin' over some afternoon."

"Well, mebbe I will. I don't go out a great deal, you know."

The two women grimaced to each other in a friendly fashion, then Amanda shut her door, and Mrs. Babcock pattered softly and heavily across the little entry, and opened Mrs. Field's door. She pressed the old brass latch with a slight show of ceremonious hesitancy, but she never thought of knocking. There was no one in the room, which had a clean and sparse air. The chairs all stood back against the walls, and left in the centre a wide extent of faded carpet, full of shadowy gray scrolls.

Mrs. Babcock stood for a moment staring in and listening.

There was a faint sound of a voice seemingly from a room beyond. She called, softly, "Mis' Field!" There was no response. She advanced then resolutely over the stretch of carpet toward the bedroom door. She opened it, then gave a little embarrassed grunt, and began backing away.

Mrs. Field was in there, kneeling beside the bed, praying. She started and looked up at Mrs. Babcock with a kind of solemn abashment, her long face flushed. Then she got up. "Good-afternoon," said she.

"Good-afternoon," returned Mrs. Babcock. She tried to smile and recover her equanimity. "I've been into Mandy Pratt's," she went on, "an' I thought I'd jest look in here a minute before I went home, but I wouldn't have come in so if I'd known you was—busy."

"Come out in the other room an' sit down," said Mrs. Field.

Mrs. Babcock's agitated bulk followed her over the gray carpet, and settled into the rocking-chair at one of the front windows. Mrs. Field seated herself at the other.

"It's been a pleasant day, ain't it?" said she.

"Real pleasant. I told Mr. Babcock this noon that I was goin' to git out somewheres this afternoon come what would. I've been cooped up all the spring house-cleanin', an' now I'm goin' to git out. I dun'no' when I've been anywhere. I ain't been into Mandy's sence Christmas that I know of—I ain't been in to set down, anyway; an' I've been meanin' to run in an' see you all winter, Mis' Field." All the trace of confusion now left in Mrs. Babcock's manner was a weak volubility.

"It's about all anybody can do to do their housework, if they do it thorough," returned Mrs. Field. "I s'pose you've been takin' up carpets?"

"Took up every carpet in the house. I do every year. Some folks don't, but I can't stand it. I'm afraid of moths, too. I s'pose you've got your cleanin' all done?"

"Yes, I've got it about done."

"Well, I shouldn't think you could do so much, Mis' Field, with your hands."

Mrs. Field's hands lay in her lap, yellow and heavily corrugated, the finger-joints in great knots, which looked as if they had been tied in the bone. Mrs. Babcock eyed them pitilessly.

"How are they now?" she inquired. "Seems to me they look worse than they used to."

Mrs. Field regarded her hands with a staid, melancholy air. "Well, I dun'no'."

"Seems to me they look worse. How's Lois, Mis' Field?"

"She's pretty well, I guess. I dun'no' why she ain't."

"Somebody was sayin' the other day that she looked dreadfully."

Mrs. Field had heretofore held herself with a certain slow dignity. Now her manner suddenly changed, and she spoke fast. "I dun'no' what folks mean talkin' so," said she. "Lois ain't been lookin' very well, as I know of, lately; but it's the spring of the year, an' she's always apt to feel it."

"Mebbe that is it," replied the other, with a doubtful inflection. "Let's see, you called it consumption that ailed your sister, didn't you, Mis' Field?"

"I s'pose it was."

Mrs. Babcock stared with cool reflection at the other woman's long, pale face, with its high cheek-bones and deep-set eyes and wide, drooping mouth. She was deliberating whether or not to ask for some information that she wanted. "Speakin' of your sister," said she finally, with a casual air, "her husband's father is livin', ain't he?"

"He was the last I knew."

"I s'pose he's worth considerable property?"

"Yes, I s'pose he is."

"Well, I want to know. Somebody was speakin' about it the other day, an' they said they thought he did, an' I told 'em I didn't believe it. He never helped your sister's husband any, did he?"

Mrs. Field did not reply for a moment. Mrs. Babcock was leaning forward and smiling ingratiatingly, with keen eyes upon her face.

"I dun'no' as he did. But I guess Edward never expected he would much," said she.

"Well, I told 'em I didn't believe he did. I declare! it seemed pretty tough, didn't it?"

"I dun'no'. I thought of it some along there when Edward was sick."

"I declare, I should have thought you'd wrote to him about it."

Mrs. Field said nothing.

"Didn't you ever?" Mrs. Babcock asked.

"Well, yes; I wrote once when he was first taken sick."

"An' he didn't take any notice of it?"

Mrs. Field shook her head.

"He's a regular old skinflint, ain't he?" said Mrs. Babcock.

"I guess he's a pretty set kind of a man."

"Set! I should call it more'n set. Now, Mis' Field, I'd really like to know something. I ain't curious, but I've heard so many stories about it that I'd really like to know the truth of it once. Somebody was speakin' about it the other day, an' it don't seem right for stories to be goin' the rounds when there ain't no truth in 'em. Mis' Field, what was it set Edward Maxwell's father agin' him?" Mrs. Babcock's voice sank to a whisper, she leaned farther forward, and gazed at Mrs. Field with crafty sweetness.

Mrs. Field looked out of the window.

"Well, I s'pose it was some trouble about money matters."

"Money matters?"

"Yes, I s'pose so."

"Mis' Field, *what did he do?*"

Mrs. Field did not reply. She looked out of the window at the green banks in front. Her face was inscrutable.

Mrs. Babcock drew herself up. "Course I don't want you to tell me nothin' you don't want to," said she, with injured dignity. "I

ain't pryin' into things that folks don't want me to know about; it wa'n't never my way. All is, I thought I'd like to know the truth of it, whether there was anything in them stories or not."

"Oh, I'd jest as soon tell you," rejoined Mrs. Field quietly. "I was jest a-thinkin'. As near as I can tell you, Mis' Babcock, Edward's father he let him have some money, and Edward he speculated with it on something contrary to his advice, an' lost it, an' that made the trouble."

"Was that all?" asked Mrs. Babcock, with a disappointed air.

"Yes, I s'pose it was."

"I want to know!" Mrs. Babcock leaned back with a sigh. "Well, there's another thing," she said presently. "Somebody was sayin' the other day that you thought Esther caught the consumption from her husband. I wanted to know if you did."

Mrs. Field's face twitched. "Well," she replied, "I dun'no'. I've heard consumption was catchin', an' she was right over him the whole time."

"Well, I don't know. I ain't never been able to take much stock in catchin' consumption. There was Mis' Gay night an' day with Susan for ten years, an' she's jest as well as anybody. I should be afraid 'twas a good deal likelier to be in your family. Does Lois cough?"

"None to speak of."

"Well, there's more kinds of consumption than one."

Mrs. Babcock made quite a long call. She shook Mrs. Field's hand warmly at parting. "I want to know, does Lois like honey?" said she.

"Yes, she's real fond of it."

"Well, I'm goin' to send her over a dish of it. Ours was uncommon nice this year. It's real good for a cough."

On her way home Mrs. Babcock met Lois Field coming from school attended by a little flock of children. Mrs. Babcock stopped, and looked sharply at her small, delicately pretty face, with its pointed chin and deep-set blue eyes.

"How are you feelin' to-night, Lois?" she inquired, in a tone of forcible commiseration.

"I'm pretty well, thank you," said Lois.

"Seems to me you're lookin' pretty slim. You'd ought to take a little vacation." Mrs. Babcock surveyed her with a kind of pugnacious pity.

Lois stood quite erect in the midst of the children. "I don't think I need any vacation," said she, smiling constrainedly. She pushed gently past Mrs. Babcock, with the children at her heels.

"You'd better take a little one," Mrs. Babcock called after her.

Lois kept on as if she did not hear. Her face was flushed, and her head seemed full of beating pulses.

One of the children, a thin little girl in a blue dress, turned around and grimaced at Mrs. Babcock; another pulled Lois' dress. "Teacher, Jenny Whitcomb is makin' faces at Mis' Babcock," she drawled.

"Jenny!" said Lois sharply; and the little girl turned her face with a scared nervous giggle. "You mustn't ever do such a thing as that again," said Lois. She reached down and took the child's little restive hand and led her along.

Lois had not much farther to go. The children all clamored, "Good-by, teacher!" when she turned in at her own gate.

She went in through the sitting-room to the kitchen, and settled down into a chair with her hat on.

"Well, so you've got home," said her mother; she was moving about preparing supper. She smiled anxiously at Lois as she spoke.

Lois smiled faintly, but her forehead was frowning. "Has that Mrs. Babcock been here?" she asked.

"Yes. Did you meet her?"

"Yes, I did; and I'd like to know what she meant telling me I'd ought to take a vacation, and I looked bad. I wish people would let me alone tellin' me how I look."

"She meant well, I guess," said her mother, soothingly. "She said she was goin' to send you over a dish of her honey."

"I don't want any of her honey. I don't see what folks want to send things in to me, as if I were sick, for."

"Oh, I guess she thought I'd like some too," returned her mother, with a kind of stiff playfulness. "You needn't think you're goin' to have all that honey."

"I don't want any of it," said Lois. The window beside which she sat was open; under it, in the back yard, was a little thicket of mint, and some long sprays of sweetbrier bowing over it. Lois reached out and broke off a piece of the sweetbrier and smelled it.

"Supper's ready," said her mother, presently; and she took off her hat and went listlessly over to the table.

The table, covered with a white cloth, was set back against the wall, with only one leaf spread. There were bread and butter and custards and a small glass dish of rhubarb sauce for supper.

Lois looked at the dish. "I didn't know the rhubarb was grown," said she.

"I managed to get enough for supper," replied her mother, in a casual voice.

Nobody would have dreamed how day after day she had journeyed stiffly down to the old garden spot behind the house to watch the progress of the rhubarb, and how triumphantly she had brought up those green and rosy stalks. Lois had always been very fond of rhubarb.

She ate it now with a keen relish. Her mother contrived that she should have nearly all of it; she made a show of helping herself twice, but she took very little. But it was to her as if she also tasted every spoonful which her daughter ate, and as if it had the flavor of a fruit of Paradise and satisfied her very soul.

After supper Lois began packing up the cups and saucers.

"Now you go in the other room an' set down, an' let me take care of the dishes," said Mrs. Field, timidly.

Lois faced about instantly. "Now, mother, I'd just like to know what you mean?" said she. "I guess I ain't quite so far gone but

what I can wash up a few dishes. You act as if you wanted to make me out sick in spite of myself."

"I thought mebbe you was kind of tired," said her mother, apologetically.

"I ain't tired. I'm jest as well able to wash up the supper dishes as I ever was." Lois carried the cups and saucers to the sink with a resolute air, and Mrs. Field said no more. She went into her bedroom to change her dress; she was going to evening meeting.

Lois washed and put away the dishes; then she went into the sitting-room, and sat down by the open window. She leaned her cheek against the chairback and looked out; a sweet almond fragrance of cherry and apple blossoms came into her face; over across the fields a bird was calling. Lois did not think it tangibly, but it was to her as if the blossom scent and the bird call came out of her own future. She was ill, poor, and overworked, but she was not unhappy, for her future was yet, in a way, untouched; she had not learned to judge of it by hard precedent, nor had any mistake of hers made a miserable certainty of it. It still looked to her as fair ahead as an untrodden field of heaven.

She was quite happy as she sat there; but when her mother, in her black woollen dress, entered, she felt instantly nervous and fretted. Mrs. Field said nothing, but the volume and impetus of her anxiety when she saw her daughter's head in the window seemed to actually misplace the air.

Presently she went to the window, and leaned over to shut it.

"Don't shut the window, mother," said Lois.

"I'm dreadful afraid you'll catch cold, child."

"No, I sha'n't, either. I wish you wouldn't fuss so, mother."

Mrs. Field stood back; the meeting bell began to ring.

"Goin' to meetin', mother?" Lois asked, in a pleasanter voice.

"I thought mebbe I would."

"I guess I won't go. I want to sew some on my dress this evenin'."

"Sha'n't you mind stayin' alone, if I go?"

“Mind stayin' alone? of course I sha'n't. You get the strangest ideas lately, mother.”

Mrs. Field put on her black bonnet and shawl, and started. The bell tolled, and she passed down the village street with a stiff steadiness of gait. She felt eager to go to meeting to-night. This old New England woman, all of whose traditions were purely orthodox, was all unknowingly a fetich-worshipper in a time of trouble. Ever since her daughter had been ill, she had had a terrified impulse in her meeting-going. It seemed to her that if she stayed away, Lois might be worse. Unconsciously her church attendance became a species of spell, or propitiation to a terrifying deity, and the wild instinct of the African awoke in the New England woman.

When she reached the church the bell had stopped ringing, and the vestry windows were parallelograms of yellow light; the meeting was in the vestry.

Mrs. Field entered, and took a seat well toward the front. The room was half filled with people, and the mass of them were elderly and middle-aged women. There were rows of their homely, faded, and strong-lined faces set in sober bonnets, a sprinkling of solemn old men, a few bright-ribboned girls, and in the background a settee or two of smart young fellows. Right in front of Mrs. Field sat a pretty girl with roses in her hat. She was about Lois' age, and had been to school with her.

Mrs. Field, erect and gaunt, with a look of goodness so settled and pre-eminent in her face that it had almost the effect of a smile, sat and listened to the minister. He was a young man with boyish shoulders, and a round face, which he screwed nervously as he talked. He was vehement, and strung to wiriness with new enthusiasm; he seemed to toss the doctrines like footballs back and forth before the eyes of the people.

Mrs. Field listened intently, but all the time it was as if she were shut up in a corner with her own God and her own religion. There are as many side chapels as there are individual sorrows in every church.

After the minister finished his discourse, the old men muttered prayers, with long pauses between. Now and then a young woman

played a gospel tune on a melodeon, and a woman in the same seat with Mrs. Field led the singing. She was past middle age, but her voice was still sweet, although once in a while it quavered. She had sung in the church choir ever since she was a child, and was the prima donna of the village. The young girl with roses in her hat who sat in front of Mrs. Field also sang with fervor, although her voice was little more than a sweetly husky breath. She kept her eyes, at once bold and timid, fixed upon the young minister as she sang.

When meeting was done, and Mrs. Field arose, the girl spoke to her. She had a pretty blush on her round cheeks, and she smiled at Mrs. Field in the same way that she would soon smile at the young minister.

"How's Lois to-night, Mrs. Field?" said she.

"She's pretty well, thank you, Ida."

"I heard she was sick."

"Oh, no, she ain't sick. The spring weather has made her feel kind of tired out, that's all. It 'most always does."

"Well, I'm glad she isn't sick," said the girl, her radiant absent eyes turned upon the minister, who was talking with some one at the desk. "She wasn't out to meeting, and I didn't know but she might be."

"She thought she wouldn't—" began Mrs. Field, but the girl was gone. The minister had started down the other aisle, and she met him at the door.

Several other people inquired for Lois as Mrs. Field made her way out; some had heard she was ill in bed. She had an errand to do at the store on her way home; when she reached it she went in, and stood waiting at the counter.

There were a number of men lounging about the large, rank, be-cluttered room, and there were several customers. The village post-office was in one corner of the store. There were only two clerks besides the proprietor, who was postmaster as well. Mrs. Field had to wait quite a while; but at last she had made her purchases, and

was just stepping out the door, when a voice arrested her. "Mis' Field," it said.

She turned, and saw the postmaster coming toward her with a letter in his hand. The lounging men twisted about and stared lazily. The postmaster was a short, elderly man with shelving gray whiskers, and a wide, smiling mouth, which he was drawing down solemnly.

"Mis' Field, here's a letter I want you to look at; it come this mornin'," he said, in a low voice.

Mrs. Field took the letter. It was directed, in a fair round hand, to Mrs. Esther Maxwell; that had been her dead sister's name. She stood looking at it, her face drooping severely. "It was sent to my sister," said she.

"I s'posed so. Well, I thought I'd hand it to you."

Mrs. Field nodded gravely, and put the letter in her pocket. She was again passing out, when somebody nudged her heavily. It was Mrs. Green, a woman who lived in the next house beyond hers.

"Jest wait a minute," she said, "an' I'll go along with you."

So Mrs. Field stood back and waited, while her neighbor pushed forward to the counter. After a little she drew the letter from her pocket and studied the superscription. The post-mark was Elliot. She supposed the letter to be from her dead sister's father-in-law, who lived there.

"I may jest as well open it an' see what it is while I'm waitin'," she thought.

She tore open the envelope slowly and clumsily with her stiff fingers, and held up the letter so the light struck it. She could not read strange writing easily, and this was a nearly illegible scrawl. However, after the first few words, she seemed to absorb it by some higher faculty than reading. In a short time she had the gist of the letter. It was from a lawyer who signed himself Daniel Tuxbury. He stated formally that Thomas Maxwell was dead; that he had left a will greatly to Esther Maxwell's advantage, and that it would be advisable for her to come to Elliot at an early date if possible. Inclosed was a copy of the will. It was dated several years ago. All

Thomas Maxwell's property was bequeathed without reserve to his son's widow, Esther Maxwell, should she survive him. In case of her decease before his own, the whole was to revert to his brother's daughter, Flora Maxwell.

Jane Field read the letter through twice, then she folded it, replaced it in the envelope, and stood erect by the store door. She could see Mrs. Green's broad shawled back among the customers at the calico counter. Once in a while she looked around with a beseeching and apologetic smile.

Mrs. Field thought, "I won't say a word to her about it." However, she was conscious of no evil motive; it was simply because she was naturally secretive. She looked pale and rigid.

Mrs. Green remarked it when she finally approached with her parcel of calico.

"Why, what's the matter, Mis' Field?" she exclaimed. "You ain't sick, be you?"

"No. Why?"

"Seems to me you look dreadful pale. It was too bad to keep you standin' there so long, but I couldn't get waited on before. I think Mr. Robbins had ought to have more help. It's too much for him with only two clerks, an' the post-office to tend, too. I see you got a letter." Mrs. Field nodded. The two women went down the steps into the street.

"How's Lois to-night?" Mrs. Green asked as they went along.

"I guess she's about as usual. She didn't say but what she was."

"She ain't left off her school, has she?"

"No," replied Mrs. Field, stiffly, "she ain't."

Suddenly Mrs. Green stopped and laid a heavy hand on Mrs. Field's arm. "Look here, Mis' Field, I dun'no' as you'll thank me for it, but I'm goin' to speak real plain to you, the way I'd thank anybody to if 'twas my Jenny. I'm dreadful afraid you don't realize how bad Lois is, Mis' Field."

"Mebbe I don't." Mrs. Field's voice sounded hard.