

A LAW UNTO HERSELF.

A NOVEL.

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PHILADELPHIA:
J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.
1878.

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CHAPTER I.

ON a raw, cloudy afternoon in early spring a few years ago a family-carriage was driven slowly down a lonely road in one of the outlying suburbs of Philadelphia, stopping at last in front of an apparently vacant house. This house was built of gray stone, and stood back from the road, surrounded by a few sombre pines and much rank shrubbery: shrubbery and trees, and the house itself, had long been abandoned to decay.

"Heah am de place, sah," said the footman, opening the carriage-door.

An old gentleman in shabby clothes, embellished dramatically by a red necktie, an empty sleeve pinned to his breast, sprang out briskly; a lady followed, and stood beside him: then a younger man, his head muffled in a close fur cap, a yellow shawl wrapped about his neck, looked feebly out of the window. His face, which a pair of pale, unkindled eyes had never lighted since he was born, had been incomplete of meaning in his best days, and long illness had only emphasized its weakness. He half rose, sat down again, stared uncertainly at the house, yawned nervously, quite indifferent to the fact that the lady stood waiting his pleasure. His money and his bodily sufferings—for he was weighted heavily with both—were quite enough, in his view, to give him the right to engross the common air and the service of other men and women. Indeed, a certain indomitable conceit thrust itself into view in his snub nose and retreating chin, which made it highly probable that if he had been a stout day-laborer in the road yonder, he would have been just as complacent as now, and have patronized his fellows in the ditch.

"Will you take my arm, William?" said the old man waiting in the road. "This is the house."

"No. I have half a mind to drop the whole matter. Why should I drag out the secrets of the grave? God knows, I shall find them out soon enough!"

"Just so. Precisely. It's a miserable business for this April day. Now, I don't want to advise, but shall we drive out on the Wissahickon and fish a bit? You'll catch a perch, and Jane shall broil it over the coals, eh?"

"Oh, of course I'm going through with it," scowling and blinking through his eye-glasses. "But we are ten minutes before the time. I can't sit in a draughty room waiting. Tell David to drive slowly down the road until four, Captain Swendon."

"Certainly, certainly," with the nervous conciliatory haste of a man long used to being snubbed.—"You hear Mr. Laidley, David?—We'll arrange it in this way, then. Miss Fleming and I will stroll down the road, William, until the time is up.—No, Jane," as his daughter was going to leave the carriage. "Stay with your cousin." The captain was his peremptory self again. Like every man conscious of his own inability, he asserted himself by incessant managing and meddling for his neighbors.

The carriage jolted down the rutted road. The little man inside tossed on the well-padded cushions, and moaned and puffed spasmodically at his cigar.

Buff and David, stiff in green and gold on the box, nodded significantly at each other. "He's nigh unto de end," said Buff. "De gates of glory am creakin' foh him."

"Creakin', shore nuff. But 'bout de glory I'm not so shore. Yoh see, I knows," rubbing his gray whiskers with the end of the whip. "I have him in charge. Mass' Swendon gib orders: 'Yoh stick by him, Dave.' 'S got no friends: 's got no backbone. Why, wid a twinge ob toothache he squirms like an eel in de fire—swears to make de debbil turn pale. It'll be an awful sight when Death gits a holt on him. But I'll stick."

Captain Swendon and Miss Fleming, left alone under the pines, both turned and looked at the house as if it were an open grave.

"So it is here the dead are to come back?" said the captain with a feebly-jocular giggle. "We'll go down the road a bit. 'Pon my soul, the atmosphere here is ghastly."

They struck into the meadows, sauntered through a strip of woodland where the sparrows were chirping in the thin green boughs overhead, and, crossing some newly-ploughed fields, came suddenly upon a row of contract-houses, bold, upright in the mud, aggressively new and genteel. They were tricked out with thin marble facings and steps. A drug-shop glittered already at one end of the block, and a milliner's furbelowed window closed the other with a red-lettered sign, which might have served as a motto for the whole: "Here you buy your dollar's worth of fashion for your dime of cash."

"Ah!" cried the captain, "no ghostly work here!—the last place where one would look for any miraculous stoppage of the laws of Nature."

"Stoppage, you should say, of the social laws of 'gents' and their ladies, which are much more inexorable," said his companion. "Oh I know them!" glancing in at the windows, as she tramped through the yellow mud, with keen, amused eyes. "I know just what life must be in one of these houses—the starving music-teacher on one side of you, and the soapboiler on the other: the wretched small servant going the rounds of the block to whiten the steps every evening, while the mistresses sit within in cotton lace and sleazy silks, tinkling on the piano, or counting up the greasy passbook from the grocer's. Imagine such a life broken in upon by a soul from the other world!"

"Yet souls go out from it into the other world. And I've known good women who wore cheap finery and aped gentility. Of course," with a sudden gusty energy, "I don't endorse that sort of thing; and I don't believe the dead will come back to-day. Don't mistake me," shaking his head. The captain was always gusty and emphatic. His high-beaked, quick-glancing face and owl's eyes were ready to punctuate other men's

thoughts with an incessant exclamation-point to bring out their true meaning. Since he was a boy he had known that he was born a drill-sergeant and the rest of mankind raw recruits. "Now, there's something terribly pathetic to me," he said, "in this whole expedition of ours. The idea of poor Will in his last days trying to catch a glimpse of the country to which he is going!"

Cornelia Fleming nodded, and let the subject drop. She never wasted her time by peering into death or religion. She belonged to this world, and she knew it. A wise racer keeps to the course for which he has been trained, and never ventures into the quagmires beyond. She stopped beside a tiny yard where a magnolia tree spread its bare stalks and dull white flowers over the fence, and stood on tiptoe to break a bud. The owner of the house, an old man with a box of carpenter's tools in his hand, opened the door at the moment. She nodded brightly to him. "I am robbing you, sir. For a sick friend yonder," she said.

He came down quickly and loaded her with flowers, thinking he had never heard a voice as peculiar and pleasant. The captain, a little behind, eyed her critically from head to foot, his mouth drawn up for a meditative whistle, as she stood on tiptoe, her arm stretched up among the creamy buds. The loose sleeve fell back: the arm was round and white.

"Very good! very good!" the whistle meant; "and I know the points of a fine woman as well as any of these young fellows."

Two young fellows, coming up, lingered to glance at the jimp waist and finely-turned ankle, with a shrug to each other when, passing by, they saw her homely face.

The captain gallantly relieved her of her flowers, and paraded down the road, head up, elbows well out, as he used, thirty years ago, to escort pretty Virginie Morôt in the French quartier of New Orleans. It was long since he had relished conversation as he did with this frank, generous creature. No coquetry

about her! It was like talking to a clever, candid boy. Every man felt, in fact, with Cornelia, that she was only a younger brother. He liked the hearty grasp of her big white hand; he liked her honest, downright way of stating things, and her perfect indifference to her own undeniable ugliness. Now, any other woman of her age—thirty, eh? (with a quick critical glance)—would dye her hair: she never cared to hide the streaks of gray through the yellow. She had evidently long ago made up her mind that love and marriage were impossible for women as unprepossessing as she: she stepped freely up, therefore, to level ground with men, and struck hands and made friendships with them precisely as if she were one of themselves.

The captain quite glowed with the fervor of this friendship as he marched along talking energetically. A certain subtle instinct of kinship between them seemed to him to trench upon the supernatural: it covered every thought and taste. She had a keen wit, she grasped his finest ideas: not even Jane laughed at his jokes more heartily. She appreciated his inventive ability: he was not sure that Jane did. There were topics, too, on which he could touch with this mature companion that were caviare to Jane. It was no such mighty matter if he blurted out an oath before her, as he used to do in the army. Something, indeed, in the very presence of the light, full figure keeping step with his own, in the heavy odor of the magnolias and the steady regard of the yellowish-brown eyes, revived within him an old self which belonged to those days in the army—a self which was not the man whom his daughter knew, by any means.

They were talking at the time, as it happened, of his military experience: "I served under Scott in Mexico. Jane thinks me a hero, of course. But I confess to you that I enlisted, in the first place, to keep the wolf out of the house at home. I had spent our last dollar in manufacturing my patent scissors, and they—well, they wouldn't cut anything, unless—I used to suspect Atropos had borrowed them and meant to snip the thread

for me, it was stretched so tightly just then."

She looked gravely at his empty sleeve.

The captain caught the glance, and coughed uncomfortably: "Oh, I did not lose that in the service, you understand. No such luck! Five days after I was discharged, after I had come out of every battle with a whole skin, I was on a railway-train going home. Collision: arm taken off at the elbow. If it had happened just one week earlier, I should have had a pension, and Jane— Well, Jane has had a rough time of it, Miss Fleming. But it was my luck!"

They had returned through the woods, and were in sight again of the house standing darkly among the pines. Two gentlemen, pacing up and down the solitary road, came down the hill to meet them.

"Tut! tut! It is that Virginia lawyer who has come up to get into practice here—Judge Rhodes. You know him, Miss Fleming. There's an end to our quiet talk. That fellow besieges a woman with his click-clack: never leaves a crack for a sensible man to edge in a word."

Miss Fleming turned her honest eyes full on his for a moment, but did not speak. The captain's startled, foolish old heart throbbed with a feeling which he had not known since that day in the boat on the bayou when Virginie Morôt first put her warm little hand in his. Virginie as a wife had been a trifle of a shrew. Love in the remembrance often has a bitter twang. But this was friendship! How sweet were the friendship and confidence of a woman! Pretty women of late years approached the captain in his fatherly capacity, much to his disrelish. A man need not have his gray hairs and rheumatism thrown in his teeth at every turn. Miss Fleming, now, saw beneath them: she saw what a gallant young fellow he was at heart. He looked down at her eagerly, but she was carelessly inspecting the judge and his companion.

"Who is the fair-haired, natty little man?"

"Oh! Phil Waring, a young fellow about town. Society man. Too fond