

**LAURA RUTHVEN'S
WIDOWHOOD.
VOLUME I**

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Laura Ruthven's Widowhood. Volume I by C. J. Wills & John Davidson

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C. J. WILLS & JOHN DAVIDSON

**LAURA RUTHVEN'S
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VOLUME I**

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LAURA RUTHVEN'S WIDOWHOOD.



CHAPTER I.

WIDOWED.

THE sun was shining on the lowered blinds ; the noise of the traffic without was effectually deadened by the tan that had been carefully spread in the roadway and frequently renewed. The clock upon the mantelpiece struck two, and the silence of what had been the sick-room was absolutely unbroken, save by the buzzing of an imprisoned bluebottle against the pane, and the sobbings of a woman in distress.

John Ruthven was dead.

What had been Mrs. Ruthven's husband lay there silent and motionless with sightless, staring eyes; the hand which his widow still clasped in her agony of grief was yet warm; but the fingers she grasped gave back no answering pressure now: the light had gone out of the eyes that a few moments before had gazed at her with affection. John Ruthven was dead, and his widow knew that he had gone from her forever.

"He is gone, nurse," said the widow through her sobs. "He is gone."

"Alas, yes, Mrs. Ruthven," said the nurse; "his troubles are over now."

And then the young widow buried her face in her hands and the tears flowed freely, and she felt a dreadful dull aching at her heart, and a choking sensation at the throat, and her mouth grew hot and dry and her hands cold, while her knees trembled as though with sudden fear. Her face still buried in her hands, she

sank upon the floor, knelt at the bedside and tried to pray ; but prayer, the luxury and relief of prayer, was denied her. How should she pray—for what ? We Protestants may not pray for the dead. Who then should she pray for—for herself ? It wasn't a time for selfishness, even in prayer, and she felt that. Why did she bury her face in her hands ? Because she could not bear to look upon death ; she who was so full of youth and life herself had never been face to face with death till now ; and seeing it for the first time she feared—she knew not why.

And as John Ruthven's widow knelt at the bedside and tried in vain to pray, her face hidden in her hands in fear, the nurse reverently closed the eyes and gently drew the sheet over the face of the dead man ; and then kindly but firmly, she touched young Mrs. Ruthven upon the shoulder, and said, " You'd better try and lie down a little, Mrs. Ruthven."

Mechanically the young widow did as she

was bid, and with a desperate attempt to master her unreasoning sense of fear, she turned her eyes once more towards the bed. The thing, the dreadful thing was gone ; all she saw of the man she had respected, of the man she had loved with a childish, unreasoning love, was the hand, the blanching hand that lay upon the coverlet.

“Yes, nurse,” she said obediently, “I will lie down. Perhaps—perhaps—” and then the unfinished sentence died away upon her lips in little sobs, and pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, she left the room on tiptoe, as though afraid to break the dreadful silence.

John Ruthven had married Laura Verner four years before his death ; she was an orphan and very young ; an heiress, too, in a small way, for she had a little fortune of ten thousand pounds of her own. She had left school at nineteen. Colonel Mackenzie, her guardian and trustee, had kept her there a couple of years beyond the usual period, because, as he

put it,—“What the deuce am I to do with a great hobble-dehoy of a girl bothering my life out, sir? I should have to take her to the play, or some function or other, every night of my life; and I should have to hire somebody to chaperon her; and your professional chaperon, sir, let me tell you, is a devilish dangerous sort of person; they're up to all the moves on the board, and all the dodges; they have, so to say, every kind of gambit at their fingers' ends; it's their business, and I'm inflammable, and a man, you know—a fellow who has served in India for four-and-twenty years can't help it.

“What chance would a chap like me have with a well-preserved woman of five-and-forty, who gave me a rattling good dinner every day of my life, and very likely would sing sentimental songs to me after my port? Why, hang it, after a bottle of port that sort of woman would only look five-and-thirty, and when she wasn't getting into mischief, Verner's girl would