

AGAINST THE LAW.

A NOVEL.

BY DORA RUSSELL.

Author of "The Vicar's Governess," "Footprints in the Snow," "The Silver Link,"

&c., &c.

CHAPTER XIII.

LAURA'S LOCKET.

Weary and tired as she was, Laura sat up that night with the sick children. They were ill and restless, of course, and required constant attention, and it was all the poor governess could do to keep herself awake.

At last the gray dawn broke, and her weary vigil was over. The trained nurse came into the room to relieve her, and Laura crept up to the cold attic, and lay down on the bed which had been hastily prepared for her.

She slept so long that, at last, Mrs. Glynford herself went to rouse her. The lady of the house had a reason for doing this. She wished, in fact, to know something more about her nephew and her governess.

She had had a hint given to her on the subject during Miss Keane's absence at Seaton-by-the-Sea. One of her friends, in fact, had remarked to her that she had seen Mr. William Glynford talking to her pretty governess in the streets.

Now, Mrs. Glynford liked not to hear any woman called pretty, and this speech of her friend's offended her. But still she never for a moment thought that William Glynford really admired Miss Keane; but last night, during Master Dolly's roars, she fancied she had heard her nephew say that he would "see her again presently" to the governess, and these words had lingered in Mrs. Glynford's mind.

So she went up to her attic about eleven o'clock, to look after her governess.

On a little uncurtained iron bedstead Laura was lying asleep, with her long, soft hair falling over her.

She was goodly to look upon, this young girl, lying there in the chill misty air on this winter's morning, and for a few moments Mrs. Glynford stood examining her critically. Then Laura moved restlessly, and turned her head; and, in doing so, disclosed to Mrs. Glynford's gaze that round her slender throat she wore suspended a valuable gold locket, in which shone a single diamond like a star.

Mrs. Glynford felt disgusted. It seemed like something improper to this virtuous maiden that a girl in a dependent position should be lying there with a valuable locket suspended round her throat! It was very suspicious, Mrs. Glynford considered, and roused the sleeping girl in a very sharp tone indeed.

"Well, you've had a good rest, at any rate," she said. "Do you know what time it is, Miss Keane? Considerably past eleven!"

"I was so tired!" said Laura, in her gentle way.

"You can't be tired, now, I should think!" remarked Mrs. Glynford.

"I am afraid that I am, a little," said Laura, with a half smile.

"Do you always wear that locket round your throat in bed, may I ask?" said Mrs. Glynford, the next moment, unable any longer to control her curiosity.

Laura blushed scarlet, hastily put up her hand to her throat, and drew her night-dress closer round it.

"I—I forgot I had it on," she faltered, shrinking away from Mrs. Glynford's hard, cold look.

"It seems a very valuable one for a young person in your position to possess," said Mrs. Glynford.

Laura made no answer to this. She felt, indeed, that Mrs. Glynford had no right to question her, and was most earnestly wishing that the florid lady of the house would go out of the room.

"Have you had it long?" continued Mrs. Glynford.

"Not very," answered poor Laura, incautiously; and Mrs. Glynford's cheeks grew redder.

"Then," she said, "I think I have a right to ask who gave it to you? If you have received it while in my house and in my service, I shall insist upon knowing the donor!"

"I do not think you have any right to ask this, Mrs. Glynford," replied Laura.

"No right to inquire who gave a girl like you so valuable a locket while you are in my house?" exclaimed Mrs. Glynford, raising her voice.

"Then I disagree with you. I think I have a right, and I mean to exercise that right. Miss Keane, who gave you that locket?"

"I really cannot tell you, Mrs. Glynford," answered Laura, with some firmness.

"Then I shall find out!" cried Mrs. Glynford. "And I think, as you do not choose to obey me—as you receive valuable presents from gentlemen, and won't tell from whom—I think, under these circumstances, you had better suit yourself with another situation at the end of the quarter."

"Very well," said Laura, and turned her head wearily on her pillow.

Mrs. Glynford went down-stairs after this, and straight into her husband's study, who was

sitting examining some colliery plans lying on the table before him.

"William, what do you think?" began Mrs. Glynford. That girl up-stairs—Miss Keane—is lying in bed, with a valuable gold locket, with a diamond star in it, hanging round her neck!"

"Well, what have you to do with that?" answered Mr. Glynford, senior, looking up with an annoyed expression.

"A great deal, I think!" retorted Mrs. Glynford. "Fancy a girl like that having a locket with a diamond in it! Some one—some gentleman must have given it to her."

"And why shouldn't the girl's sweetheart give her a locket, I would like to know?" said Mr. Glynford, senior.

And just then William Glynford, junior, who was standing at one of the windows of the room with a newspaper in his hand, turned round and came forward, and for the first time his aunt saw him.

"Oh, you are there, William, are you?" she said. "Well, you heard me tell your uncle, then, I suppose, about the valuable locket of Miss Keane's! What do you think of it?"

"I think," replied William Glynford, "that Miss Keane is a very lucky young lady to possess a valuable locket."

"What nonsense!" answered Mrs. Glynford, sharply; for she often had a dim idea that her nephew was laughing at her. "I think it is absolutely improper for a girl in her position to possess such a locket; and sleeping with it round her neck, too!"

As Mrs. Glynford said these last words, William Glynford flushed deeply. His uncle noted this, and said, "Do go away, Maria; don't come here any more with such foolish stories. William and I are going to be very busy over the plans of a new colliery, and we have no time to listen to such rubbish!"

"Very well," said Mrs. Glynford, highly offended. "It will be some time before I trouble you with my presence again!"

And, having said this, she walked out of the room, shutting with great violence the door behind her.

"William," said Mr. Glynford, senior, "did you give that locket to Miss Keane?"

"Yes, uncle; I did," he said. "I went to Seaton-by-the-Sea, where Miss Keane lives, a few days ago; and, but for an accident, should then have asked her to be my wife."

"All right, lad," said Mr. Glynford, senior, heartily.

William Glynford left his uncle's house with a great softness and gladness in his heart. Mrs. Glynford, unconsciously, had made her nephew a very happy man.

When he returned to his house, which was in the town of Farnham, William Glynford wrote to Laura Keane, asking her to meet him on the following afternoon at a spot he named in the outskirts of the place.

"I wish to see you," he told her, "because, for one thing, I am anxious to talk to you about your sister's writings. I have read those that she sent me, and recognized her ability, even her genius, at once. But, my dear Miss Keane, they are immature—the writings of a clever mind in its dawn. Now, if she chooses, I shall undertake to publish them; but, before she faces the hard criticisms of those who give no mercy, and who know not, and care not, of the youth and inexperience of an author, would it not be well for her to pause, to wait a few years—in fact, till the powers which she undoubtedly possesses have been matured?"

These words, written with the kindest possible motive, made Laura very sad, for Maud's sake.

Indeed, the same post which brought Laura William Glynford's letter brought her also an ardent, even an impatient one from poor Maud.

Laura felt that Mr. William Glynford's opinion would be a sad blow to her poor sister, and yet she understood its kindness and wisdom.

And to ask Maud to wait for years for the fame she was so longing to achieve seemed to Laura to be almost an impossibility.

"Poor Maud!" thought the elder sister, sadly.

But waited until she had seen William Glynford to write to her.

Accordingly, on the following afternoon she said to Mrs. Glynford that she would like to go out for half an hour.

That lady demurred, but finally gave an ungracious consent; and so Laura was free to meet to meet William Glynford.

She did meet him, and again, in the kindest fashion, he repeated his advice about Maud's writings.

"But she will be so cruelly disappointed, Mr. Glynford," said Laura, half-pleadingly.

"Yes," he answered, gently; "but remember, I say this only for her sake. Tell her what I think, and then, if she still wishes to publish, I shall see about getting it done at once."

"Very well; I will tell her," said Laura.

"And there is another thing," continued Glynford, "that I wish to talk to you about, Miss Keane—"

"Oh, not to-day," interrupted Laura, as William hesitated for a moment. She thought, indeed, that he was going to ask her about Mr. Bingley, and felt that she had not strength of mind to endure the subject.

"It is only about a very stupid thing," said William Glynford, smiling. "My aunt, it seems, has, somehow or other, seen the little Christmas-box that I gave you a short while ago, and has been bothering you, most likely, about it!"

The burning blush which dyed Laura Keane's cheeks at these words told William Glynford that he had guessed the truth.

"It is so, then?" he said. "Well, I will tell you how I know. She came and told my uncle of this wonderful discovery that she had made while I was in the room. My uncle was just very angry with her; and, Laura, to put an end to any misconception on her part, will you give me a right to tell her that I gave this locket to you—that I gave it to one whom I fondly hope will some day be my wife?"

Laura half started at these, and a sort of exclamation broke from her lips.

"May I, then, have this hope?" continued William Glynford.

And he put out his hand and took Laura's.

"Don't ask me just now," answered Laura, very much agitated; and after a moment's thought, "Don't say anything more to-day about this, please, Mr. Glynford. I—I am grateful; I thank you; but don't speak of it again to-day!"

"But why?" said William Glynford, looking at her steadily. "If you can like me well enough, you know, Laura, I can offer you a comfortable home, and, I think I may add, a faithful heart."

"I know," said Laura, greatly distressed—"I know how good you are, and how kind; but—but I am unworthy, Mr. Glynford!"

And quite suddenly the poor girl burst into a passion of tears.

"Unworthy!" repeated William Glynford, in a tone of pain and astonishment.

"I mean," sobbed Laura, "something that I cannot tell you that you cannot understand. You must not think of me, Mr. Glynford; you must only think of me, at least, as a friend."

William Glynford was silent for a moment or two, and then he said, in his frank, kind way, "Why don't you confide your trouble, whatever it is, to me? I will do anything for you, Laura, if you will only trust me!"

For a moment she hesitated. Could she tell him all? But no, no. She decided the next instant. "I have not courage; I could not tell him the frightful truth. No; unless Mr. Bingley will swear never to betray me, I can never be anything to William Glynford!"

"Do not ask me," was all she said; and, wounded and disappointed, William Glynford continued to walk by her side.

He escorted her back to Bridgenorth House, and, as they proceeded along the highway, a dogcart passed them, in which Laura saw that Mr. Bingley and a stranger were seated.

Bingley scowled as he recognized those two walking on the road. He touched his hat in a very surly fashion, and the dogcart passed on, but neither William Glynford nor Laura spoke of Bingley.

They tried to talk of indifferent things, but were both greatly embarrassed. Laura was was thinking of Bingley with dread, and Glynford with anger. Bingley, in the meanwhile, was driving on with an ugly look on his countenance and a certain resolve in his heart.

"I'll put a stop to this, at any rate, Mr. William Glynford," he was mentally telling himself, and scarcely answered his companions for some minutes, who was enlarging on the merits of a house that Bingley was thinking of purchasing.

Yes, Bingley had decided to buy a country house, and to marry a pretty young lady, and to begin at once in as good a position as any "of those Glynfords."

It disturbed his mental calculations, therefore, in some measure to meet Laura with William Glynford, when he was actually on his road to view the house of which he meant her to be the future mistress.

But he would put a stop to all this nonsense, and by the time he reached the showy villa that he contemplated buying, had almost recovered his complacency.

The villa, which was named Willoughby Hall, was almost as fine a place as Bridgenorth House.

Bingley felt, as he looked round at the glass, at the avenue, at the terrace, and the lake, that he could hold his head high when he got there, at any rate. He felt, indeed, that Mr. Bingley, of Willoughby Hall, would be some one, and wished to be some one as quickly as possible. So he did not hesitate much about terms. The agent of the property, by whom he was accompanied, found him a much easier person to deal with than he had expected. Bingley, in fact, drove home in the dogcart the virtual proprietor of Willoughby Hall, and proudly contemplated himself as such. And the same evening he announced his purchase to Laura.

He did this in a letter, in which he also informed her of his intention to put a stop to her intimacy with William Glynford.

"Dear Miss Keane (he wrote), when I met you to-day I was on my road to complete a purchase of a very fine place in this neighbourhood, called

Willoughby Hall. I am now its possessor, and hope shortly to have the pleasure of showing you over it. It is quite a gentleman's mansion, and no lady need be ashamed to live in it. Perhaps you can take a hint, for I mean that to be one. I wish to see you about certain arrangements, which I have, with great trouble and expense, made about certain notes. I went back to Seaton-by-the-Sea for the purpose of seeing you, but found, to my annoyance, that you had returned to Bridgenorth House. I saw little miss, your sister, and she told me. But now I must see you, so please write and tell me where we can most conveniently meet. And another thing, my young lady! I am not partial to any of the Glynfords, and don't like to see you with Mr. William, and must request that you will not walk with him again. However, if you will write and tell me where I can see you, we can settle all this, and something else also, which I hope will be agreeable to you.

"I remain, very sincerely yours,

"RICHARD BINGLEY.

"P.S. Any time to-morrow will suit me."

Such was the letter that Laura received from the man that she dared not refuse to obey.

CHAPTER XIV.

BINGLEY AND LAURA.

With an aching heart, Laura Keane went to meet Richard Bingley; with a sinking heart looked in his coarse visage, and knew before he spoke what he was about to say.

Oh, what shame she felt! She who loved one man stealing out of the house like a guilty thing to meet another! Yet she was forced to do this. She had not dared to ask leave of Mrs. Glynford to go out again so soon, and had had to wait until that lady left the house, when Laura tremblingly proceeded at once to Bingley's shop in Front street.

Bingley was standing as he usually did in the centre of his "establishment," talking to some good customer or other, when Laura entered. Indeed, he had quite a little group round him at the moment, for it had become known in the town that the day before Mr. Bingley had completed the purchase of Willoughby Hall.

So one or two friends had gone in to congratulate him, and Bingley was smiling, well pleased to be known as a landed proprietor at last.

"Yes; it's time I was giving up this kind of thing," said Bingley, glancing with a grand air at his counters and garment-adorned windows. "When a man gets to forty-five or so, it's time he was taking a little rest."

"Ha, ha, ha, Bingley!" laughed a facetious friend in the corn trade. "Forty-five, indeed!—fifty-five, you mean. Why, man, you must be, surely, looking out for a second wife!"

Bingley tried to smile, but he did not like it.

At this minute, and while there was still a laugh going on at his expense, he caught sight of Laura. His expression changed at once.

"Excuse me," he said, to his friends, "but I wish to speak to this young lady." And he went up and shook Laura's hand before them all.

"How are you?" he said. "So you've come here? I didn't mean you to do that. But it's no matter; come with me into the private office."

He led Laura across the shop, and his friends looked after them with a smile.

"That's Mrs. Glynford's governess, is it not?" said one.

"She's a pretty girl; twenty years too young for Bingley, though, if that's his little game," said another.

Bingley having taken Laura into the office, and closed the door, said, "You got my letter, then? I expected a note from you to ask me to meet you in the country somewhere, and we might have had a walk together."

"I could not fix any time," answered Laura, with drooping head. "The children, you know, are ill at Bridgenorth House, and your sister sent for me to help to nurse them, and does not like me to leave the house."

"Humph!" said Bingley. "It was kind, I must say, of Maria—just like her selfish ways—to send for you in your holidays to nurse her sick cubs. But about going out?—you go out to meet Mr. William Glynford, it seems?"

Laura felt that she blushed deeply.

"I went out for a short walk yesterday," she said, "after sitting up all night with the children, and I chanced to meet Mr. Glynford."

"Well, you mustn't chance to meet him again, that's all!" said Bingley. "In fact, Miss Keane—Laura—I'm a plain man, and I suppose you've seen what I've been driving at! I want you to be my wife, and I'll give you a good home, and you'll be free of Maria and her sick brats to-morrow, if you please!"

Laura did not speak. She had expected to hear some such words, and yet, when they came, they seemed to shock her—a yet further degradation.

"You know I've bought Willoughby Hall!" proceeded Bingley. "Well, I want a pretty young wife to sit at the head of my table there; and they'll be no stinting, I can tell you. You may hold your head as high as Maria's any day for that matter, and drive in your carriage, too, as well as she does."

Still Laura was silent. She stood looking down, her heart beating fast, while Bingley was enumerating the advantages of his proposal.

"Say the word," continued Bingley, "and