

AGAINST THE LAW.

A NOVEL.

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CHAPTER XXII.

DISCHARGED.

The next time that Doctor James Hay entered the ward in which Laura was lying, in a few broken and faltering words she told her whole story.

The doctor listened, and sympathized. He, too, knew what it was to fight with fortune, and to be almost moneyless in the world. When a lad he had been left to begin life's battle, and had fought well, and been a faithful, tender son to a widowed mother. He could understand, therefore, how the poor, trembling girl before him had yielded to temptation. He knew well how easy it is to pay your way and walk quite straight when your purse is well lined, and the wolf is not waiting at the door.

But he listened to Laura's tale nearly in silence. Then, when she ended, he said, in quick, sharp accents, "And you care for this other man—this Mr. Glyndford?"

"Yes," answered Laura, blushing crimson. "And you won't apply to him now?" asked Doctor Hay.

"No," said Laura. "I have parted with him for ever—I shall see him no more—I will bring no further trouble upon him!"

Again for a minute or two the doctor was silent, and a restless sigh rose on his lips.

"All the same," he said, presently, with rather a painful smile, "you must live. This affair of passing stopped notes is very serious and awkward. This Bingley has a good case against you, and could have you arrested if he chose. You won't marry him now, I suppose?"

"Never!" said Laura, energetically. "He may put me in gaol—may transport me; but he cannot force me to marry him!"

"Well, you must be prepared, for he'll revenge himself upon you if he can."

"Yes, I know," said Laura, sadly. "But I'll try to prevent him," continued the doctor. "You were brought into the accident ward—a nameless patient, picked up in the street. That's all I have to do with. I know nothing, of course, of Mr. Bingley, nor of Mr. Glyndford, nor of Miss Laura Keane. I know a young woman brought in with a compound fracture of her arm, who refused to give any name, and for her only I am responsible. This young woman must be worse by the next visitor's day, and I will give orders that no one shall be admitted to this ward. By the following visitors' day this young woman with the compound fracture will be able to be removed. Thus, when our friend Mr. Bingley arrives, he will find that this young woman has gone, a discharged patient; and I don't think Mr. Bingley or his detective will find her in a hurry."

"I—I do not understand," said Laura, breathlessly, as the doctor paused. "You must affect to be too ill to be seen by any one when your persecutor next presents himself; for you are not yet strong enough to be removed. But in another week or so you will be. Then, quietly, some night, I will take you to my mother, and you can stay with her, if you like, as her companion; for she is getting old, and can afford to give you a small salary."

"Oh, Doctor Hay! how can I thank you!" said Laura, greatly affected; and she put out her little, trembling hand.

"Come, young lady," said the doctor, trying hard to put on his professional air and to overcome certain unusual emotions in the region of his heart; "you must not excite yourself. I will arrange all for you, and you need not be afraid of seeing Mr. Bingley at No. 2, Bismark Avenue, where my mother lives."

But there are wheels within wheels. He was the house-surgeon; but there was another person whom he must take, partly at least, into his confidence before Laura could be privately removed.

This was the comely matron, Mrs. Carnaby, a youngish widow, who would have no objection, the doctor believed, again to enter into the married state.

She was a rosy-cheeked and comely woman, who had not been shy in letting the doctor see that she regarded him very favourably.

The police-officer had applied to this lady in the beginning, and, after Bingley's interview with Laura, the matron had promised to let him know how the young lady was getting on.

Thus the doctor knew that he must make a friend of Mrs. Carnaby, in order that she might not oppose him in his purpose.

He accordingly sought the widow in her comfortable sitting-room, and found her just sitting down to a very appetizing little supper.

"Well, doctor," she said, "I am glad to see you. I hope you will stay and sup with me."

"I will stay and chat with you," answered the doctor.

"Very well," replied the widow.

"It's about that young woman with the compound fracture that I have come to talk to you,"

said the doctor; and the widow felt not a little disappointed to hear it.

"Oh!" she said. "Well, what about her?"

"She has told me her history," replied the doctor. "That man who came here to-day is not her husband, as he claimed to be; but she had promised to marry him because he knew of a very foolish action that she had committed."

"Well!" again said the matron yet more coldly.

The doctor recognized the change in Mrs. Carnaby's voice.

"She was in love with another man before this Bingley insisted upon her marrying him as the price of his silence. She could not forget her other lover, so ran away the night before the day fixed for her wedding."

"Bless me!" exclaimed the widow.

"Then she came to London, hoping to obtain employment, was run over in the street when faint with over-fatigue, and, I daresay, want, and brought here. Now this Bingley has found her out again, and I want you, who are a good, kind woman, to help me to place her beyond the reach of this man, and put her in the way of earning her livelihood."

For a moment or two the widow was silent. Then she said, looking keenly at Doctor Hay, "You seem to take a great interest in this girl?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"She appealed to me to save her," he said, diplomatically; "so what could a poor man do? I was sorry for her when she talked of the man she really loves. She'll end by marrying him, of course, and he's a fellow in a good position, it seems. But, for the present, the thing is to keep her out of this Bingley's way. He can still do her harm—still part her from her lover; and I've half-promised—for I know you will help me if you can—to smuggle her out of the hospital, and my mother will give her a shelter, and this Bingley will not be able to find her again if we manage it well."

The widow walked up and down the room twice, and then came to where Doctor James Hay was sitting, and laying her pretty, fat, white hand lightly on his shoulder, said, looking at him very tenderly, "I will do whatever you ask me."

"Thank you, you dear, kind creature!" said the doctor, turning round, and taking one of the widow's hands in his. "Ah, Mrs. Carnaby, I do not know how to thank you!"

"I would have done it for no one else," whispered the widow, tightening her clasp on the doctor's shoulder.

"Well, that is truly good of you! But, good gracious!" taking out his watch; "do you see what time it is! I had a friend to meet at a quarter to ten, and now it is actually ten o'clock. Good-night, Mrs. Carnaby! Thank you again and again for your kindness. We'll talk this little matter over to-morrow, but now I must be off at once."

As the doctor went running down the hospital stairs to keep his pretended appointment, he felt that in his attempt to save Laura from matrimony, he was running a very great risk of being caged and bound himself.

CHAPTER XXIII.

POOR DOCTOR HAY!

During the eight or ten days that followed his interview with the widow, Doctor James Hay had very difficult cards to play.

It must be admitted that he was flirtatious in his manner with her, for, indeed, he did not dare to be anything else.

Laura, without being in the least aware or thinking of it, had captured the doctor's heart, and though without hope of return, he was willing to serve her to the best of his ability.

In the meanwhile, Bingley had called very often at the hospital to know how Laura was progressing, and had had various interviews with Mrs. Carnaby. Indeed, Bingley rather admired the widow, and more than once, she told the doctor, would have forced a five-pound note into her hand.

"But I refused it, of course," said the widow. "He cannot say I have taken his money, at any rate. I am deceiving him for your sake, and it is not a matter of money."

"You are the kindest and most generous of women!" exclaimed the house-surgeon.

"And nothing else, doctor?" asked the widow, casting down her eyes.

"I dare not say anything more!" answered the doctor.

"But if I give you leave?" said Mrs. Carnaby.

"Don't be too good to me," replied the poor doctor, and then endeavoured to change the conversation.

But "Ah, doctor!" sighed the widow; "I shouldn't make a bad wife, if I could be induced to marry again."

Poor Doctor Hay felt that it was all over with

him, but at this moment a tremendous rap at the door interrupted this tender conversation.

"Come in!" hastily cried the doctor.

"Please, sir, you are wanted at once," said one of the assistants, putting in his head. "An accident."

And so the doctor escaped for that time.

But he felt that it was becoming too dangerous to have any more confidential interviews with the gushing widow, and therefore asked Laura on the same day if she thought herself strong enough to be removed to his mother's.

Her answer was that she was quite well enough to leave; and so it was arranged between them that Laura should quit the hospital, accompanied by the doctor, about seven o'clock on the same evening, and they should drive to his mother's house, the doctor taking the precaution to change the cab three times on the way.

Mrs. Carnaby helped to dress the poor girl, who was so weak and shattered that she could scarcely stand, and thus, between the doctor and the matron, Laura left the ward, and quitted the hospital by a back entrance.

There was no one watching, however.

Mrs. Carnaby had completely hoodwinked Bingley.

Laura was almost unconscious when the doctor lifted her out of the cab, and when a brown-faced, country-looking woman, with an old-fashioned cap tied under her chin, helped to carry her into the neat parlour of a neat and quiet house.

Mrs. Hay was rather a cold-mannered woman as a rule, but she adored her son, so for his sake was very cordial to Laura.

She got the girl to bed, nursed her, and attended upon her, and all to please this beloved son.

But when she went downstairs again, she found Doctor James Hay sitting in a very disconsolate attitude over the fire.

Then she went up to him and laid her hand fondly on his shoulder.

"I like her," she said; "and, perhaps—"

Her son understood what she meant, for he gave a restless sigh.

"She is a good girl, I am sure," he said; "and they began talking of something else."

But, before leaving the house, he went up to look at his young patient. Laura was now asleep.

"She is a pretty creature," said Mrs. Hay, who had gone up with her son.

"Yes," he answered, and stood there looking at Laura—wondering if the girl had really parted with her first love for ever.

He did not wake her, but promised his mother to "look in" some time during the following morning; and then, not in high spirits, went away.

But a picture followed him: the picture of a fair, innocent-looking girl asleep.

But a more substantial picture met his gaze as he ascended the hospital staircase. This was Mrs. Carnaby, the matron, who was waiting for him, to hear how Laura had borne the journey.

"I could not go to rest," she said, holding out her hand to the doctor, "until I had seen you. I felt so anxious. How is the poor thing!—and how did your dear mother receive her?"

"My mother is very glad to have her," answered the doctor; "and she bore the removal as well as I could expect. I left her asleep."

"That is all right. Well, when this Bingley comes to-morrow, what shall I say to him?"

"Refer him to me," replied the doctor. "She has been discharged upon my authority, and I know nothing more about her."

"Very good," said the widow, looking tenderly at the doctor, and holding out her hand.

"I—I can never repay you," said the doctor, nervously.

The widow smiled and sighed, and looked archly at the unhappy man.

"You must find out some way," she said, playfully, "or I shall find one for you."

CHAPTER XXIV.

NUMBER SEVENTEEN.

The next day, at half-past two o'clock, when the hospital doors were opened to admit visitors, among them came Bingley. He had grown coarser-looking of late, had taken to drinking much more than was good for him, and had a bloated, shaken appearance, which told its own tale.

He had come alone this day, and went on until he came to the female ward, at the entrance of which he had expected to see his friend, the matron.

But Mrs. Carnaby was not there. A nurse asked him if he wished to see any friend among the women in the ward. He replied in the affirmative, and she led him in.

"What number is your friend's bed?" asked the nurse.

"Number seventeen," he replied.

"Number seventeen is empty," said the nurse.

"The young woman who last occupied it left the hospital last night."

"Left!" Bingley exclaimed, with fury. "If this is true—if I have been cheated again, I'll have her life!"

And he ran forward as he spoke to where the little iron bedstead ticketed number seventeen stood.

Nothing remained of Laura there—no name, no token of her presence.

"Where is the house surgeon?" cried Bingley. "Where is the matron? They shall be answerable to me for this!"

Doctor James Hay was somewhere in the wards, and one of the assistants went for him, and presently, looking quite cool, but a trifle pale, the house-surgeon walked into the female ward, and approached the infuriated man.

"Where is the young woman," said Bingley, addressing the doctor in hard and passionate accents, "who occupied this bed?"

Doctor James Hay drew out his note-book before he made any answer, and apparently referred to it.

"Number seventeen, female ward," he said, as if speaking to himself. "Oh, yes, here is the case—compound fracture of the left arm, and so on. That young woman, sir," he continued, looking up from his note-book, and addressing Bingley, "was discharged, cured, last night."

"Discharged! Cured!" the draper cried, half mad with passion. "Where is she gone, then, sir? How dare you discharge her when you knew she was, or ought to have been, my wife, without consulting me?"

"Ah," said the doctor, "you came here among the visitors with a detective officer, and claimed to be this young woman's husband, and she said you were not, and appealed to me to protect her!"

"Where has she gone? Answer me that," said Bingley, trembling with passion.

"How should I possibly know that?" shrugged Doctor Hay.

"Where is the matron?"

Mrs. Carnaby was sent for, and in a few minutes, looking very much flurried, appeared in the ward.

"What motive had you for deceiving me, madam?" said Bingley, addressing her, sternly. "Why did you tell me that the young woman who occupied that bed was too ill to be moved, when you knew that she was about to leave?"

"I did not know," replied the matron, with some spirit. "It was only yesterday that the doctor decided she was well enough to leave."

"And where was she going?" asked Bingley.

"She declined to say," replied the matron, with a glance at the house-surgeon. "I think, sir, she did not wish you to know."

"Doctor Hay, I will apply to the governors of this hospital, and if you do not lose your appointment here, sir, for smuggling patients away without the leave of their friends, it shall not be my fault."

After Bingley had said this, with a dark scowl he pulled his hat further over his brow, and quitted the ward.

And after he was gone, the matron whispered a few words to the house-surgeon.

"I fear you have got me into great trouble," she said.

"You shall not lose by it," answered the doctor.

And the matron smiled, well satisfied.

CHAPTER XXV.

TRUE LOVE.

Later in the same day, Doctor James Hay found his way to his mother's house.

"She is going on very well," said the old lady.

And when the doctor saw his patient, he found that his mother's account was true.

Laura looked better now and brighter, believed herself to be safe from her persecutor, at all events, and was sure that Doctor James Hay would help her in the future if he could.

She little guessed the trouble that she had already brought upon the poor doctor. Even while she smiled upon him he was thinking grimly of other and most unwelcome smiles, which he was forced to encounter for her sake.

During the day, indeed, Mrs. Carnaby had as good as asked him to marry her; hinting pretty broadly that she expected him to do this for risking her situation to please him. The doctor had tried to put her off with jocular words, but the widow would not be cajoled.

The doctor felt almost certain that the amorous widow would tell where Laura was, unless he married her.

No wonder, then, that the poor doctor groaned. But suddenly an idea struck him.

"Mother," he said, when Miss Keane is a little stronger, would you mind visiting for a month or two some quiet spot by the sea?"

"I'm an old woman, James," she said, "and don't like new places."

"But it will do her good," urged James.

"If you wish it, I have nothing further to say," replied the mother; but the words were spoken unwillingly.

But presently Laura said, "Please don't send me anywhere else. I want to stay where I am. I shall get quite well here, and I don't want any change."

The doctor did not speak. He had hoped that if his mother would change her abode he might be able to keep her new residence a secret. If Mrs. Carnaby did not know where Laura was, she could not tell Bingley, if the doctor should decline to marry her. But the idea of a removal was evidently very distasteful both to his mother and Laura, and the doctor could not tell them the dilemma in which he found himself placed.

This grew more perplexing every day. Mrs. Carnaby was determined to have the affair settled. She wrote a little note to the doctor on the following morning, asking him to come to her room, as she wished particularly to see him, and with a sinking heart he complied with her request.