

AGAINST THE LAW.

A NOVEL.

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CHAPTER I.

MONEY.

In the school-room of Bridgenorth House, in Midlandshire, about half-past nine o'clock one December evening, the wearied governess of the family sat down with a heavy sigh, feeling that for that day, at least, her duties were over.

She was a pretty girl, but this night she had that unmistakable look which worry and anxiety will give even to the fairest features.

Many painful thoughts were indeed crowding on her mind as she sat there in the dimly-lighted school-room. But her most pressing anxiety at that moment was that she wanted money.

She presently drew a letter from the pocket of her dress, which she had received during the day. A tradesman's bill! In this letter she was informed that unless her over-due account was paid before the commencement of the Christmas holidays, that the tradesman would be compelled to resort to the painful necessity of informing her employers, and asking them to pay the amount out of her salary.

"Ah! If he knew," she thought, "that I have nothing to receive! That I have been already compelled to ask Mrs. Glyndford to advance my salary, and all the cruel things that she said to me when I did so. And now I have nothing left—nothing more than what will barely pay my train fare to Seaton. Oh! what shall I do! Shall I go and see this man—Mr. Bingley! Shall I tell him the truth—how I have been compelled to send all my money home to save poor mother from absolute starvation! But to tell him this—to degrade myself—how can I—how can I!" And the poor girl rocked herself to and fro in her miserable anxiety and doubt.

Then she took another letter from the pocket of her dress—a letter from her mother.

Alas! in this disorderly scrawl there were no fond hopes, no tender advice, no loving counsel to her absent girl, such as most affectionate mothers write. It was only the old story over again that the governess read in the dim school-room, to deepen her troubles; only the old complaint: "Want of money! This was the craving eye which this young girl constantly received from home.

"We were almost entirely without means," wrote her mother, "and your small enclosure, dear Sissy, came just in time. It paid the county court summons, and the butcher has agreed to give me a little more credit. But my dear child, why do you not exert yourself to end this miserable state of affairs? You are very pretty, surely you could get married, and not allow your poor mother to be degraded as she is now! And my health is so wretched too, and I am forced to take so much support. Altogether, I feel so very low, but I hope to hear on your return that you have some prospect before you; that some rich old man—anything is better than poverty—has taken a fancy to you."

The rest of the letter was in the same strain—a selfish, degrading letter, which made its reader's fair cheeks burn and blush for shame.

"Oh, mother, mother!" she thought: "if you would but conquer this fatal weakness—if you would only not drink everything away—how happy we might be! But it's always the same thing—always the same old, miserable story: and now its weight has fallen upon me!"

She rose restlessly as she made these last bitter reflections. She had, indeed, no longer time to sit still. To-morrow the holidays began, and she was going to her miserable home for a month; she had, therefore, many arrangements to make before she went to bed. Her packing was to begin, and the sooner she commenced it now the better.

But it was a weary task! The loved word home, for her, had no music in its sound. She knew too well what it meant. Her mother's bloated countenance; her young sister, peevish and deformed! These were the images that this word conjured up for her. But, all the same, she must prepare to go. So, slowly and wearily, she went up to the attic, where all the trunks were kept in Bridgenorth House. Mrs. Glyndford would not allow one to remain in any of the bedrooms.

"Unpack your things," she had said to the governess, on her first arrival, "and then take your boxes to the trunk-room. I can allow no shabby old boxes standing about my rooms!"

Poor Miss Keane, the governess, had shabby old boxes, and blushed with all a young girl's sensitiveness about trifles when Mrs. Glyndford made her ungracious remark.

"They are, indeed, shabby," she thought, looking at the two worn black trunks, which had first come into use on her mother's wedding-day, twenty-three years ago.

So, during the next three months, whenever she went into Farnham, in the suburbs of which town her employers lived, she always looked into the trunk-shop windows, to see if there was anything likely to suit her narrow purse.

But no. Two pounds, three pounds, even four pounds, would be an impossible sum for her to give out of her expected quarterly payment from Mrs. Glyndford, as her whole salary was only forty pounds a year, and Mrs. Glyndford expected that she would dress well, and appear in evening costume, when she went with her pupils into the drawing-room.

Thus, with a sigh, she would turn away from the trunk-shop, and had almost given up the idea of buying one at all, when, passing a broker's shop one day, amid the strange miscellany it contained, she saw a leather portmanteau, ticketed eighteen shillings.

Mrs. Glyndford had unfortunately given her her salary that morning, and she yielded to the temptation of having a respectable travelling case in her possession. Yet the day did not pass without her regretting her purchase; for the night's post brought a letter from her mother, asking for the loan of ten pounds. She had received ten from Mrs. Glyndford, but two were already gone. She had bought a few little necessities and her portmanteau!

She sent her mother the eight pounds she had in her possession, and thus left herself penniless.

During the next quarter of the year, a child's dance was given at Bridgenorth House, and Mrs. Glyndford said to her governess that she hoped she had bought herself, or would buy herself, a new dress for the occasion.

Alas! the poor girl had not now the means of doing so. But after some consideration she determined to order one at the shop in Farnham where the family dealt, and where she had bought a few trinkets which she had already purchased in the town.

This shop must be specially described. It belonged to a Mr. Bingley, and—though Mrs. Glyndford hoped that no one knew, or, at least, remembered the fact—Mr. Bingley was Mrs. Glyndford's own brother.

But a considerable social step lay between them. Mrs. Glyndford had been a pretty girl, and had married Mr. Glyndford, a widower and a coal-owner. He was fairly well-to-do when she married him, and moved in a circle above the Bingleys, who were drapers in a large way in the town.

But scarcely was she married when the now passed away wonderfully prosperous days of coal-owners began. Mr. Glyndford became suddenly rich, and Mrs. Glyndford rose to the occasion.

She had always been a little, vulgar, poor woman; and now grew unbearably so.

"Her head is turned," her brother, the draper, said to his wife; and when Mr. Glyndford bought Bridgenorth House, Mrs. Glyndford no longer countenanced her own family. Yet she still dealt at the shop. She, indeed, did this at her husband's command, who was a highly respectable man, and not ashamed to own his relations.

But Mrs. Glyndford was. That shop in Front street, Farnham, was unpleasant to her sight. She went there in early morning, and rarely were her carriage horses to be seen standing before her brother's door.

She visited in "a different set," she said, and this was actually true. But one day, when a certain grim visitor, who calls on all sets alike, appeared in the house above the shop in Front street, and carried off her brother's wife as his prey, Mrs. Glyndford did condescend to pay a visit of condolence.

But the widower's wrath was hot upon the occasion, and he told Mrs. Glyndford that he did not want her company now, when she had never been civil to "poor Sarah" for the last eight or nine years. The brother and sister, in fact, had a serious quarrel, and Mrs. Glyndford retired to her carriage very red, and shedding a few tears.

"To think," she said to her husband, on her return home, "after I had made such a sacrifice—actually driven there in the daytime, though I knew those spiteful Hollans will tell it all over the town, and of course recall our unfortunate relationship! And, after I had done this—faced the cruel remarks of the world, as it were—he insulted me!"

And once more Mrs. Glyndford began to cry. But her husband, who was a sensible man, gave her no encouragement.

"Well," he said, "Bingley's your relation, and not mine; and, moreover, he's a fellow I don't particularly like; but, for all that, I think he served you right."

"Served me right!" repeated Mrs. Glyndford, "What do you mean, William?"

"Simply, my dear, that as you have chosen virtually to cut your brother and his wife for the last few years, you could not expect him to feel very grateful to you for paying her a visit when she was no longer able to appreciate the compliment."

Mrs. Glyndford was very angry, but ordered her own and her servants' mourning at her brother's shop; partly, because there was no

other good draper's in the town, and partly because Mr. Glyndford requested her to do this.

"Don't be foolish," he said. "If you want people not to talk, try to stop your brother's tongue by a good order. Put money into a man's pocket, my dear, if you want to stand well with him!"

Mrs. Glyndford accordingly took her husband's advice, and the handsome order which she gave at his establishment no doubt served to soothe her brother's wounded feelings. But he did not really forgive her. He took off his hat to her with a satirical bow when she came into his shop, or when he met her carriage in the streets, but he never spoke to her. He kept out of her way, but all the same he knew pretty well how things went on at Bridgenorth house.

Thus he knew the governess both by sight and name. He therefore made no objection to Miss Keane's order, when she gave one, and a pretty, well-made dress was sent from the shop in Front street in time for the child's ball at Bridgenorth House.

But it cost more than Miss Keane had intended to pay. Altogether, the bill came to eleven pounds, and this bill the poor governess was now unable to meet.

She had, in fact, been compelled to ask Mrs. Glyndford to give her her next quarter's salary in advance, for her mother's circumstances were, by her own account, now almost desperate.

"We are starving," the mother had written, and what could the daughter do? She did what she could; she begged Mrs. Glyndford to pay her salary in advance, and Mrs. Glyndford had said some very rude and unkind things on the occasion.

"And there is another thing I wish to impress upon you, Miss Keane," said Mrs. Glyndford during this interview. "Be sure you never have anything on credit at Bingley's shop. Always pay for what you get at the time."

When Miss Keane heard these words, she knew that she owed Bingley's shop eleven pounds. The bill had been sent in already twice, and the poor governess had intended to settle it when she received her money before the Christmas holidays. But now she was forced to send this money away before it was due.

She was still undecided what to do about this bill—whether to see Mr. Bingley, or to write asking him to wait—when she went up to the attic to bring down her boxes to pack, and her new portmanteau.

She sighed regretfully when she looked at the last-named possession. If she had not foolishly bought this portmanteau, she was thinking, she might now have had a little more money left.

But now there was no help for this, so she carried her portmanteau down to her bedroom. It was a convenient packing-case, after all. It held her limited wardrobe, in fact, except her dresses, and these she placed in the despised black boxes.

The pockets of the portmanteau, indeed, seemed endless. There were pockets and inner pockets, and carefully examining these, she perceived a small slit in the striped lining of one pocket. She got out her needle to mend this, and in turning the lining back better to perform the task she pulled out with it a small flat parcel, which had been pushed up through the slit between the lining and the leather.

Naturally she opened this parcel, and gave a half-cry as she did so. A wonderful, and, for a moment, she thought, a welcome sight met her gaze. Five fresh five pound bank-notes were enclosed in the little flat parcel that she had found, and now she knelt with these five notes in her hand by the side of her portmanteau.

She looked at them one after the other; stared at them, examined them carefully; and was convinced that they were genuine notes.

Then another question presented itself to her mind. *What should she do with them?*

She had no right to them—at least, she supposed so. True, she had bought the portmanteau, and they must have been in it when she had purchased it. But did that make them hers?

She knelt there still, thinking. They must have belonged to someone; but that someone might now be dead. Some poor sailor, perhaps, and his portmanteau had been cast on shore, and sold by the person who picked it up to the broker from whom she had bought it. Thus she speculated. If this were the case, whose were they? Not Mrs. Glyndford's, at least, for she had nothing whatever to do with them; yet if she were to tell Mrs. Glyndford, (as Miss Keane decided she was sure that the mistress of the house would claim them for her own)

Twenty-five pounds! only a small sum to a rich woman, but a large one to the poor care-burdened governess.

"I wonder if I might borrow them?" at last she thought.

This sum would pay Bingley's bill; would leave her money to take home—money to help the miserable mother, the poor invalid sister.

The temptation grew stronger. They belonged to no one now, at least, she mentally argued. She was wronging no one, so she rose from her knees, and having brought her purse, placed the five notes within it.

CHAPTER II.

AT BINGLEY'S.

The next morning, about eleven o'clock, Miss Keane, the governess, left Bridgenorth House to pay her bill at Bingley's shop.

It was an imposing shop. Bingley was indeed rich, as well as his sister; but he made no parade of his money, he used to say, with a

sneer, when speaking to his neighbours of his fine relations.

A good many people were in the shop when Miss Keane entered it. Mr. Bingley never served behind the counter. He walked out of his private office sometimes, and spoke to his friends and acquaintances when they came in; but he never sold anything. He was talking to some ladies in the middle of the shop when Miss Keane entered, and the widower's look fell admiringly on the pretty governess from Bridgenorth House.

Miss Keane felt very nervous. Her notes were in her purse, and the bill was in her hand which she had called to pay; but she felt unhappy—almost guilty.

But if they were not hers, they were no one else's, she whispered to her sinking heart, and proceeded to produce her bill to one of the shopmen, and then laid down three of the five-pound notes which she had found.

The shopman of course took them up, without surprise or comment. He also, perhaps, knew the pretty governess from Bridgenorth House by sight; but if he thought of it all, he must naturally have supposed that Miss Keane had just received her salary, and was therefore sure to have notes in her possession.

The bill she had called to pay was eleven pounds, and the shopman lifted up the three notes and the bill, and took them to Mr. Bingley's private office—for Mr. Bingley looked after the monetary affairs of his establishment himself.

Mr. Bingley (who had scarcely ceased to look at his sister's governess since she had entered the shop) saw her give her bill and the notes to the man, and as the shopman went into the private office to get the change and a receipt, Mr. Bingley followed him.

The man at once presented him with the notes and the account. Mr. Bingley first receipted and stamped the account, and then glanced carelessly at the notes. But no sooner had he observed the number on one of them than he started, and eagerly examined the two others.

Then he opened his desk, and took out a paper. He scanned this, and then again examined the notes, and a grim smile of satisfaction passed over his not very pleasant countenance as he did so.

He was a somewhat coarse, self-indulgent-looking man, this Bingley, with thick lips, a reddish complexion, and reddish-gray hair. His eyes, however, rather contradicted the expression of his mouth. They were sharp, and shrewd—hard, even cold. "You can't cheat me," they seemed to say; but his other features told a different tale.

While he was looking at the notes, his shopman was looking at him. And, by the expression of the shopman, you saw no love was lost between them. Bingley was unpopular. He paid his way honestly enough; but there are two ways even of paying one's way. One is pleasant, and the other disagreeable, and Bingley chose the disagreeable way.

"Johnson," he said, looking up sharply, "ask that young lady—Miss Keane—who has just paid this money in to step this way for a few minutes. I want a word with her."

"Very well, sir," replied Johnson; and he walked out of the office to obey his employer's commands.

He felt sorry for the pretty girl from Bridgenorth House when he gave her Mr. Bingley's message.

Miss Keane started, turned pale, and then suddenly red.

"Is there anything wrong?" she said. "Why does Mr. Bingley wish to speak to me?"

"I cannot tell you, miss," said Johnson. "Whether he saw anything wrong about the notes or not—but I don't know. But you had better speak to him."

Making a violent effort to control herself, Miss Keane then followed Johnson to Mr. Bingley's private office.

Mr. Bingley was standing with his back to the large fire burning in the grate, as they went in, and he moved forward a step, and placed a chair for the governess.

"Good morning," he said; "cold morning, but seasonable. Take a chair. Johnson, go out, and shut the door."

Johnson went out, and shut the door after him, and then Mr. Bingley's manner changed.

He put on a familiar air, and with something between a leer and a sneer, he laid the three five-pound notes which Miss Keane had given the shopman on the desk before him.

"Now, young lady," he said, "I am going to ask you a question. Where did you get these notes?"

Miss Keane flushed scarlet, but to a certain extent she retained her composure.

"Why do you ask, Mr. Bingley?" she said.

"I have a reason for asking," replied Mr. Bingley. "I am not sure, but I fancy I have seen these notes before."

"But—if you are not sure?" faltered Miss Keane.

"No, not sure," said Bingley, looking hard at the girl, "but still I think so. However, you wish to pay your account with these notes—wherever you got them?"

"I—I—came to pay my account," answered Miss Keane, very nervously.

"Very well; here is your receipt, and here is your change. But, remember, I take these notes under protest. And another thing, young lady, I shall require your address when you are absent from Farnham! You are my sister's governess, are you not?"