

AGAINST THE LAW.

A NOVEL.

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CHAPTER XVI.

ENGAGED.

And are you really going to marry her, Richard?" cried Mrs. Glynford, half rising in her extreme surprise at Bingley's announcement.

"I suppose so," said Bingley. "That usually follows, doesn't it, when a young lady accepts a man?"

"Well, I am surprised!" said Mrs. Glynford.

"It's a queer affair, I think," said Mr. Glynford, senior, glancing uneasily at William.

William Glynford had turned extremely pale, and his look was fixed with a stern and inquiring expression on Mr. Bingley.

"I don't see how it's a queer affair!" retorted Bingley to Mr. Glynford's remark. "I am quite in a position, I think, to marry, and to marry a lady. I have bought Willoughby Hall and the property round it, and that is a good enough home to offer any girl, isn't it?—especially one who has been out as a governess?"

"You've bought Willoughby Hall, Richard?" cried Mrs. Glynford. "Why, you must be getting a rich man?"

"I've bought it, and paid a pretty long price for it, too, I can tell you," replied Bingley. "And as for getting a rich man—well, if sixty or seventy thousand pounds means a rich man, that's about my figure."

"Sixty or seventy thousand pounds!" repeated Mrs. Glynford, and began to look more kindly on her brother.

"And I mean," continued Bingley, "as soon as I can make a good bargain for the premises, to cut the establishment in Front street. No need to go on toiling all one's life! No; I've got a bit of land, and I mean to amuse myself with it, and turn a country gentleman before I have done."

"You are an ambitious fellow!" said Mr. Glynford, senior, dryly.

Bingley flushed.

He understood his brother-in-law's innuendo quite well, for he was no fool, and it made him very angry.

"Oh, I can act the gentleman as well as another," he said; "and the young lady that I am going to marry is a born lady, for that matter, though she is poor and has been a governess. But we do not always end as we begin," added Bingley, spitefully, looking at his sister.

"Perhaps you will excuse me, uncle?" said William Glynford at this point of the conversation, rising to leave the room.

"Certainly, my lad," answered his uncle. "You'll look in at tea-time, though, won't you, William?"

"If I can," replied William Glynford; and then he bowed coldly to Mr. Bingley, and left the room.

"That young gentleman," said Bingley, with a gleam of triumph, as William Glynford disappeared, "seems a little put out about my news."

"He is surprised; and I do not wonder at it," said Mr. Glynford, senior, sharply.

"Why should he be surprised?" asked Bingley, captiously.

"Miss Keane is a pretty girl, and I know William admired her," answered Mr. Glynford, "but there's no accounting for taste."

"No; you are quite right," said Bingley, roughly. "Miss Keane has chosen me; and I advise Mr. William Glynford not to interfere between us."

"He never would have married her," said Mrs. Glynford, scornfully.

"Well, he never will marry her," said Bingley; and as he spoke, Mr. Glynford, senior, rose from the table, and, without any apology, went whistling out of the room, and the brother and sister were left alone.

"How are your children?" began Bingley, wishing to be civil.

"Better, poor dears; but it's been very trying," said Mrs. Glynford.

"And you sent for Miss Keane to help to nurse them, didn't you?"

"Yes; but she's of very little use, and has been ill since she's been back. But of course, with all these love-affairs going on!"—and Mrs. Glynford half-sneered, half-laughed.

"Was William Glynford her lover, Maria?" asked Bingley, seriously.

"He gave her a splendid gold locket, at any rate," answered Mrs. Glynford, not without pleasure in the idea of annoying her brother; "and I hope it won't make you feel jealous, Richard, if I tell you that she sleeps with it round her neck occasionally; for I've seen it there."

Bingley frowned, and bit his lip. "I'll put a stop to all that sort of folly," he said, angrily.

"Oh, he never meant to marry her!" said Mrs. Glynford, contemptuously.

Again Bingley frowned. "He went to see

her at Seaton-by-the-Sea, where she lives, at any rate," he said. "I saw him there."

"And you went, too, Richard? How long have you known Miss Keane? How did you become acquainted with her?" asked Mrs. Glynford, curiously.

"I saw her first at the establishment in Front street, and admired her greatly," answered Bingley, slowly.

"And is the marriage to be soon?" asked Mrs. Glynford.

"In a fortnight or so, I think," replied Bingley. "No good dawdling when one has made up one's mind, I think."

After this, Bingley went away. He did not ask to see Laura again, but said that, with Mrs. Glynford's permission, he would call the next day.

Then, upon the strength of Willoughby Hall, Mrs. Glynford made an effort.

"You had better dine with us to-morrow, Richard," she said. "We dine at seven, and—well—as you will have various things to arrange with Miss Keane, we shall be glad to see you."

Bingley accepted the invitation. He felt, indeed, that it was his duty to accept it. He meant to rise in the social world now, and was rather anxious, therefore, to be on good terms with his sister.

"Thank you," he said. "Yes, I'll be with you to-morrow at seven. And, Maria," he added, as he shook his sister's hand, "you'll be kind, won't you, to Miss Keane, until the event is over? She's a little upset to-day, but it will be all right by-and-by, and I shall feel obliged to you if you will show her some little attention."

"Very well," said Mrs. Glynford.

And in pursuance of this promise, or, perhaps, out of curiosity, she went to Laura the moment her brother was gone.

She found her sitting with the sick children and the nurse, with a bright colour on each cheek, and a strange, excited look about her.

Mrs. Glynford was not a clever woman, nor a thoughtful one. She regarded only the surface of things, and noticed not the undercurrents which ebb and flow in each human heart.

She saw only, therefore, that Laura Keane had a bright colour, and supposed that this arose from her delight at being about to marry a rich man, and because her days of poverty and dependence were nearly over.

"So," she said, before the nurse, "I have to congratulate you, Miss Keane?"

Laura did not speak. She looked for a moment at Mrs. Glynford, and then rose hastily and went to the window.

"My brother has told me," continued Mrs. Glynford; "and he has informed me also that he has purchased Willoughby Hall, and that he is going to retire from business. Well, it's a great match for you, Miss Keane, and I hope you will be happy. It is to be in a fortnight, I hear?"

"So soon?" said Laura, turning round, and speaking in a strange and altered voice.

"Well, don't you know? The lady always fixes the day, doesn't she?" said Mrs. Glynford.

"He has fixed everything," said Laura. "I am nothing! I am quite powerless!"

Mrs. Glynford was not very clever, but even she could not now fail to see that there was something wrong somewhere.

"I do not understand you," she said. "You speak as though you were forced to marry my brother."

Again Laura was silent.

"He is coming to dine here to-morrow," proceeded Mrs. Glynford; "but, of course, if there is anything unpleasant—"

"It is no matter," said Laura, as Mrs. Glynford paused. "I have promised; but—but I would rather not speak of it. Let us talk of something else, please, to-night, Mrs. Glynford;" but still that lady felt that there was a mystery about this marriage.

She remembered her own delight and pride when she became engaged to Mr. Glynford, and how fond she had been of talking about her approaching wedding.

But here was a girl who was going to marry a rich man also, who shrank from the subject, and "altogether looked very strange," she told her husband afterwards.

"I tell you what it is, Maria," said Mr. Glynford, senior. "No disrespect to your brother, but the girl's a fool! I don't believe she cares for Bingley. She is marrying him because he is a rich man, and has bought a fine house; but she would have made a better bargain if she had waited a bit."

"You mean William?" said Mrs. Glynford. "I don't believe he ever would have married her."

"Then I do," said Mr. Glynford; "and Miss Keane has lost a better man than your brother, though, remember, as I said before, I

mean no disrespect to him. But William's a fine fellow—an honest, straightforward, generous-minded man; and—and Miss Keane has made a fool of herself!" he added, with some excitement.

CHAPTER XVII.

"GOOE-BYE, SWEETHEART, GOOD-BYE."

When Mr. Glynford saw his nephew again, he expressed pretty much the same opinion to him as he had done to his wife.

"I do not understand it," answered William Glynford, gloomily enough.

In fact this young man was bitterly disappointed at the idea of losing Laura. And he was certain also that there was some mystery about the whole affair. He had not forgotten Laura's startled look when Bingley had appeared before them on the sands at Seaton-by-the-Sea; and he remembered her terrified aspect when his name was announced at his uncle's dinner-table the day before.

"She's marrying for money, as many a pretty girl has done before," said Mr. Glynford, contemptuously.

"I do not believe that," said William, and sighed restlessly.

"Then what on earth is she marrying the fellow for?" asked Mr. Glynford, senior. "He's no beauty, at any rate."

Again William Glynford sighed.

"Maria has asked him to dine to-day," continued his uncle; "and they tell me the wedding is to be in a fortnight. Sharp work, isn't it?"

"Impossible!" said William Glynford, unable to hide his agitation. "In a fortnight?"

"So Maria told me, and she had heard it from Bingley; but it's a queer piece of business altogether. Maria says the girl has a strange look, and won't speak about her marriage. Perhaps they are very poor at home, or something of that sort."

"They are very poor," answered William Glynford; but still she knew—she knows that I would gladly do anything to help her. No; I cannot believe that she is marrying this man only for his money!" "Why don't you ask her?" said Mr. Glynford. "When I was a young fellow, I wouldn't have let the girl I liked be snapped up by another man without saying a word."

"Uncle," said William Glynford, greatly agitated, and beginning to pace the room with hurried steps, "I—I can trust you; you are my friend as well as my uncle; and I will tell you the truth. I have asked Miss Keane. I asked her to marry me last week, and she refused me and bade me think of her no more."

"Then she must be mad!" said Mr. Glynford. "Refuse a fine young fellow like you, well off and all that sort of thing, and accept a common-place, coarse-looking man like Bingley? Why, it's monstrous; the girl must be a lunatic!"

"Yet it is true," said William Glynford; "and it is true also—I am certain that it is true—that she hates and fears Bingley. I have watched her; a girl's countenance doesn't turn gray-coloured and ghastly when the man she loves, the man whom she intends to marry, enters the room. Yet hers did yesterday. Somehow or other, Bingley has obtained power over her, and is now forcing her to be his wife."

"I'll speak to her myself, then," said Mr. Glynford. "There shall be no such kind of work going on in my house. If she chooses to marry him for his money, let her; she is not worth a sigh if that is her motive! But if he's got some hold on the poor lass, and she is doing this against her will, then I won't have it. I'll speak to her this very day; and if she doesn't want to see Bingley any more, see him she shall not."

"If it's anything about money—" began William Glynford eagerly.

The old man patted his nephew kindly on the shoulder. "All right, my lad," he said; "we can square up afterwards; but, in the meantime, any such offer had better come from me. And do you keep up your heart. If she's a good girl, and worth having, you shall have her yet."

When Mr. Glynford, senior, returned home, after his interview in the town with his nephew, he at once sent up one of his servants whom he had met in the hall to ask Miss Keane if she would come down to the library to speak to him for a few minutes.

When the poor girl entered the room, her appearance struck the kindly-hearted man at once with the truest compassion. "My dear," he said, going forward and taking one of her chill, trembling hands in his, "I am an old man, so you must not be offended with me for what I am about to say. It's about this marriage of yours."

"It's no use talking of it Mr. Glynford," said Laura, as Mr. Glynford paused a moment. "It—it must be."

"But why, my dear?" asked Mr. Glynford. "Now, come; I happen to know a thing or two—I happen to know that a certain nephew of mine, a good-looking fellow—ay, and a nice fellow, with an income of a good two thousand a year—has taken a fancy to you, and is very much cut up because you are going to marry somebody else. Now, I don't want to say much against that somebody else—he is my wife's brother, and so I do not care to speak against him—nor do I wish for that matter; but he's over fifty—an old man to you—and he's a coarse, vulgar fellow, to my mind, into the bargain. To compare him with William, in fact, is impossible. So I can't believe—I don't believe—that

he is your real choice. Now, if you have got into any trouble; if you want money, in fact, and are marrying Bingley because of that, or because he has advanced money to you, don't you do it. I'm ready and willing to help you; and so is William. If it's money you want, name the sum, and you shall have it."

Laura's eyes filled, and she took Mr. Glynford's hand in hers. "You are good and generous," she said; "and so, too, is William. Believe that I appreciate you both; that I know that William's wife would be a happy woman; and—and—"

But here poor Laura stopped, for tears choked her utterance.

"Then what the deuce d'ye hesitate for?" cried Mr. Glynford, trying not to show his own emotion. "If you like William, he likes you; so why don't you make a match of it?"

"There is a reason," faltered Laura—"a cause that I cannot explain. There are some things that may not be told, and this is one of them."

Mr. Glynford looked puzzled. "Well, I don't understand it," he said, presently. "William is a lad of a thousand—an honest, straightforward, gentlemanly fellow; and Bingley is—well, at best a cad! But I'll say no more; you must please yourself."

"Once more let me thank you for your great goodness to me," said Laura, in a broken voice. "And will you tell William—tell him from me that I am not worthy of him—that—"

"Don't distress yourself, my dear," said Mr. Glynford, kindly, as Laura paused. "I asked to see you because I hoped to do some good; but as I cannot, we may as well end this painful interview. Now go away and lie down, and take care of yourself; and, remember, if you change your mind, just let me know."

Laura went away, and lay down in her attic in her lonely nursery. But presently she was forced to rouse herself. At six Mrs. Glynford came to look after her, and to say that it was time for her to dress for dinner; and so, weary and heartsick, Laura rose, dressed, and went down into the drawing-room.

She found Mrs. Glynford already there, and Adolphus John and Mr. Bingley, who had forced himself into a dress-coat for the occasion, made when he had not been so broad across the shoulders or so wide round the waist as at present. Bingley was, therefore, red, uncomfortable, and cross.

"How precious red you are!" said Adolphus John, staring at his uncle during a pause in the rather awkward and constrained conversation which occurred before dinner was announced.

"Do you think so?" answered Bingley, gruffly, wishing that Adolphus John was only his boy just for a few minutes, that was all.

"Ma thinks so, too," continued Adolphus John. "Ma said to 'pa she thought it was drink."

"Hold your tongue, you naughty, wicked boy!" cried Mrs. Glynford, rushing to Master Dolly and shaking him. "How dare you tell such stories?"

"They ain't stories!" said Adolphus John. "You said—"

"Take that, you bad, wicked boy!" said his mother, giving a vigorous slap on Dolly's cheek, and the young gentleman was taken shrieking from the room.

This episode, as may be imagined, did not tend to make things more comfortable.

Bingley felt that his sister had been speaking disparagingly of him before the child, and this was very galling to him. But he tried to smother his wrath, and no further allusion was made to Master Dolly after he had been removed in disgrace.

The dinner passed off as such dinners generally do. Bingley grew in a little better humour, and his coat did not feel half so tight after a glass or two of Glynford's excellent champagne. He also grew more at ease with his sister and Laura, and occasionally ventured a joke or two for the benefit of the two ladies.

After dinner was over, Mrs. Glynford left him alone with Laura.

Then Bingley went up to her, and took her hand. "Well, my dear," he said; "and have you settled it? Is the marriage to be here, or are you going to your mother's?"

"I don't care," said Laura; "it is all the same."

"Then let it be here," said Bingley. "I'll speak to Maria about it, and I don't think she'll make any objection. We will have a quiet affair—no fuss—and bust out afterwards, when we get to Willoughby Hall."

Laura said nothing. She was wondering if a last appeal would do any good—if anything that she could say would induce Bingley to turn from his purpose.

"I have brought you a ring and a locket," said Bingley. "Here they are."

And he put the two jewel-cases in the girl's hand.

She held them for a minute, and then, with sudden passion, sank down on her knees before him, and the jewel-cases fell unheeded on the floor.

"Mr. Bingley," she said, grasping his unwilling hand, "will you hear me—hear me on my knees before you? You know what I would ask. Release me from the promise you wrung from me! Do not force me to marry you, when nothing but misery can result!"

"What folly is this?" said Bingley, angrily. "Get up, girl! What! after everything is settled would you turn back? But it's no good. If you kneel there all day you would get nothing from me."