

[NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.]

THE BROKEN SEAL.

A Novel.—By MORA RUSSELL.

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CHAPTER XXV.—LADY MILLS.

All her old friends gathered round Lady Lester with hearty congratulations when she once more found herself settled as mistress of Roden Court. Many of these had indeed been of the same opinion as Mr. Harford, and had never taken very kindly to poor Jim.

"It is a shocking thing," they all said, "this young man's death, but it always seemed so unjust to Alan Lester to lose his inheritance—and poor Mrs. Doyle, some of them added with a pained smile, "she has lost her last chance of Roden now!"

Mrs. Doyle herself had felt that fate had been most unkind to her when James Lester's tragic end finished his evident intentions regarding her youngest daughter. But true to her character, she at once tried to make the best of it, and there are always good-natured people in the world who either do believe, or effect to believe, whatever their friends choose to tell them.

Alan and Lady Lester both knew that had poor Jim lived, in all human probability Mrs. Doyle would have persuaded Lily to marry him, but as Jim was dead, what was the good of talking of what might have been? Lady Lester, high minded, and with a lofty, gentle graciousness of character, which placed her alike above small motives and small words, never, even to her son, spoke of Mrs. Doyle's disappointment. They had both been touched and pleased by Lily's wish to look on Jim's dead face, and Lady Lester had kissed the girl as she went away with her large grey eyes full of sadness and strange awe.

"I think she would not have treated my Alan as her sister did," thought Lady Lester, but on this subject, of course, she was also silent to her son. They loved each other most dearly, those two, but Alan had never told his mother what he felt when Annette's skirt had actually brushed past him on the morning of her wedding day. For his mother's sake he had endured his life since then, bravely enough to all outward seeming, but with such real weariness of spirit that all things seemed of pretty equal value to him.

He felt this especially on the night after James Lester had been laid in his grave. Poor Mrs. Lester had left Roden as soon as the funeral was over, and Alan had gone with her to the station, and then the strain was all over. He stood now exactly in the same position as he had stood some few months ago. He was Sir Alan Lester of Roden Court, and he went out walked up and down on the terrace in front of the house after he returned from the station, and his heart was very sad.

Why had this been? he thought, looking up at the dark misty sky. He had lost faith and happiness, and poor Jim's life, by the strange change that had happened to them both. And Annette—no one ever named her to him now—no one but that once when Lily had spoken of her. But Alan never forgot her. He thought of her smiling, loving, nestling in his arms—his darling—before this had all happened to part them. And now the old life had come back—the old life without its brightness and hope.

And while Alan was thus pacing up and down the terrace at Roden with folded arms and gloomy brow, thinking of his lost love, at the same moment Annette's heart was filled with the bitterest regret as she thought of him.

She had heard that morning from her mother, and knew now that Alan Lester was once more in his old place at Roden, and that her own marriage had been a fatal and irreparable mistake. She had tried, heartily tried, to make the best of it, but Sir Rupert's changeable temper made it impossible to satisfy him. He was suspicious and jealous to such a painful degree that he must have embittered any woman's whole

existence. It amounted almost to madness, Annette often told herself during those dreary journeyings from city to city which she had gone through since her marriage. In Italy, about the beginning of the new year, she had been attacked with a sort of intermittent fever, really brought on by worry and constant travelling, and as she did not at once throw it off her husband insisted upon returning to England to consult the doctors there, and the first home news that Annette received was the tragic story of Jim Lester's death and its immediate effect on Alan's position.

Annette shed some very bitter tears, the bitterest tears of all her life, over her mother's letter. For she had loved Alan, and as she thought of him, gentle, calm, always considerate for others, she mentally compared him with the headstrong, passionate being with whom she had linked her fate. Rupert Miles loved her indeed, but with a love that frightened her, that suspected her, that had no sympathy for her, and was full of selfishness.

She was ill when they reached town, yet he would hardly consent for her mother to be sent for. But the doctor he had called in advised this, and so Annette was allowed to write and ask her mother to stay with them "for a few days," and this invitation gave Mrs. Doyle inexpressible gratification.

Mrs. Doyle in truth had become secretly a little uneasy about Annette, and the Colonel openly so. The Miles were known to be a "strange family" from root to branch, and Annette's letters had certainly been anything but satisfactory. Among his other peculiarities Sir Rupert insisted upon seeing every line his wife wrote or received. As he scarcely ever left her side, Annette had no chance of writing a private letter either to her mother or to Lily. She had thus never written to Lily since her marriage. She did not care for her natural words to her dear young sister to go under her husband's supervision. She could not write coldly to Lily, and Sir Rupert would have got into a jealous rage if she had expressed her true feelings.

He was particular about crimes, and he fixed the day and the train he allowed his mother-in-law, Mrs. Doyle, to be invited. Annette dare not show her real thankfulness once more to be allowed to see one of her own people. If she had, Sir Rupert would in all probability have telegraphed to her mother not to come. He was quite capable of this, and in her four months of marriage Annette had learned that to show any pleasure unconnected with her husband was sure to give mortal offence.

There was naturally great excitement at Kingsford Grange at the idea of Annette's return to England, and at the idea of seeing her again.

"I shall persuade Sir Rupert to come down to Ribton," said Mrs. Doyle to her son and daughter, little guessing how difficult Sir Rupert was to persuade; "and then we shall see more of Annette—it will be so pleasant to have her near us."

This remark was made during Mrs. Doyle's exultation at receiving the invitation to visit Annette for a few days at her house in town, and her son, Major Doyle, who was now staying in Kingsford, pulled his long tawny moustache thoughtfully, and wondered whether his mother were wise to wish to bring Annette once more into the neighbourhood of Alan Lester.

Major Doyle had arrived at Kingsford a few days after Alan had once more taken possession of his old home, and the two men had met with considerable, though entirely unexpressed emotion. They were naturally both thinking of the same thing—of the bright autumn day when Frank Doyle had carried the dead soldier's letter to Alan, all the bitter consequences it had brought. Doyle had blamed his mother, and blamed

Annette, for their treatment of Alan; but Mrs. Doyle had not allowed him to interfere. She never allowed any one to interfere with her, and she could not of course foresee what had happened, she told herself. Had poor James Lester lived, and had Lily married him, as Mrs. Doyle fully intended her to do, Mrs. Doyle felt that no mother could have managed better for her daughter. As it was, who could have expected that a young man of his age, would have already got into one of those "miserable entanglements," and that this wretched young woman would have been mad enough to murder her lover because he was tired of her! Mrs. Doyle had had such circumstances arrayed against her that she could not blame herself because her plans had miscarried. But other people always, blame us when things miscarry. Major Doyle did not tell his mother so, but he thought what a pity his mother had not allowed Annette to act like an honest girl, and how now she would probably have been a happy young wife, instead of, probably an unhappy one. Major Doyle had heard something of Rupert Miles, and he was uneasy about his sister. Without absolutely saying so he had conveyed this impression to his mother, and Mrs. Doyle was, therefore, greatly elated by this invitation to stay with Annette, and boasted she would induce her son-in-law to bring his wife to Ribton Hall.

Ribton was a great gloomy house, situated some five or six miles from Kingsford, but no one had ever lived there since the Doynes had come into the country. But that might be all changed. Mrs. Doyle drove over and looked at the place one day, and talked a great deal about its capabilities of improvement. She mentally refurnished it, and redecorated it, and being accustomed to manage her son-in-law too.

Lily was very pleased to have her brother at Kingsford, and these two walked across the park to the Court, on the first morning that Major Doyle was at home. Lily had bloomed out during the last few months, and was now such a very pretty girl that naturally Major Doyle felt not a little proud of her. They talked as they went, and were sure of poor Jim, and with a little shudder and a sigh Lily pointed out the spot under the leafless trees where the poor lad was found lying.

"I liked him so much," said Lily in her frank girlish way, "he was so good-natured, and oh! Frank, he looked so beautiful after he was dead!"

"And you saw him?" said Doyle, looking at his young sister.

"Yes; mother was so angry; but Mr. Harford took me, and Alan."

"And you like Alan?"

"Yes," answered Lily, and Major Doyle noticed the sudden blush on the fair face, "everyone must like him. Poor Jim was so fond of him, he used to call him Uncle Alan. It is all so sad."

They found Alan Lester at home, and the two men clasped hands almost in silence.

"Well, there have been great changes," at last said Alan.

"It's been a bad business," answered Doyle, pulling as usual at his moustache: "little Lily here has been showing me where the poor lad was found."

"Yes," and Alan looked at Lily.

"I suppose there's no doubt that girl shot him?" continued Doyle.

"No reasonable doubt, seemingly—yet I can't help feeling sorry for her. It seems poor Jim had promised to marry her, and—"

"And wouldn't, I suppose?"

"He had changed to her, and I think he fell in love with somebody else," answered Alan, with a smile, and he again looked at Lily.

"Not with Lily?" asked Doyle, with a laugh, who had not heard of Jim's admiration.

"So they say," smiled Alan, but Lily shook her head.

"He was just a boy," she said "I—I should think, poor fellow, he fell in love—do you call it?—with every one he came near."

"At all events, this poor Laura Davis had fallen in love with him. She came down here, and young Chaplin heard her swear he should never live to marry anyone else, and the same night poor Jim was shot, and this girl was known to have a pistol with her—it looks very black—but she's to be tried next month."

"Hanging's too good for her," said Doyle, and then they changed the conversation, and after a while, just before they left, Lily with

some of her old shyness mentioned Annette's name.

"We have heard from Annette," she said, without looking in Alan's face; "and she is in London. She is not well, and mother is going to her on Thursday."

Alan felt ashamed when he thought of it afterwards, of the great stillness and pang that seemed to tear his heart as he listened to Lily's words. He stammered; he tried to make some common place remark, and he was painfully conscious that both the brother and sister must know that he still loved Annette.

"Do you know anything of Miles?" asked Doyle the next minute, in his quick nervous way.

"Nothing," answered Alan, recovering his ordinary manner.

"One of our fellows was staying with him in Scotland last year; before he met Annette. Rather an eccentric youth, I fear," continued Doyle.

"How is he eccentric, Frank?" asked Lily, now looking anxiously at her brother.

"I hear he's a devil of a temper, my dear; if anything crosses him the whole house is raised; to Cavendish told me."

"Oh! poor Annette," murmured Lily, almost under her breath.

"It was a mistake," said Major Doyle, "however, it can't be helped now, and she must just make the best of him; but don't you be in such a hurry, Lily."

After they were gone Alan could scarcely control his miserable excitement. To hear of her again—Alan—Lily, and with a man without self-control, perhaps cruel and unkind to her!

The idea was terrible to Alan. His love for Annette had been as unselfish as a man's love can be, and had she become his wife his tenderness to her would have known no bounds. It was his nature to protect and cherish anything small and weak, and the dumb beasts knew it, and children crept on his knee. But what could he do for Annette now? Nothing, nothing, he told himself. This young madman might beat her, might kill her, and he could not interfere. She had a brother and a father, and Doyle had said "It was a mistake, but she must just make the best of it!"

"Yes," thought Alan, with a bitter heart, "that is what we all had better do. And I loved her so. Oh! my God! I loved her too well."

In the meanwhile, the brother and sister, Frank and Lily Doyle, were walking across the park, and presently they ran up the staircase at Kingsford like a couple of children. They had met the postman, and there was another letter from Annette for Mrs. Doyle, and with her fair face flushed and her hair disordered, and with her hat in her hand, Lily rushed into the drawing-room to seek her mother, unaware that any visitor was at the Grange.

No less a personage than Mr. Harford, of Kime, was leaning against the mantel piece, and talking very amicably to Mrs. Doyle. Mr. Harford had been thinking very seriously during the past week. He had found out he was a year older than he had thought he was, for one thing. He had clung to forty-nine, but something had proved to him indisputably that he was fifty. One year did not seem to be much, but Mr. Harford felt that he had now no time to waste if he ever meant to marry at all. And it was his duty to marry—he, a Conservative gentleman, ought to leave a Conservative heir, when he retired to his place among his Conservative forefathers. So he made up his mind to turn over a new leaf. There were certain things to be given up, but Mr. Harford was a man of determination. He counted the cost, the advantages, and the disadvantages of matrimony, and the advantages of being Lily Doyle's pretty face in the example, had won the day.

For nearly twenty-five years he had never felt so much in love with a woman as he had felt Lily Doyle on the day after they had seen poor Jim Lester lying still in death, and Mr. Harford had taken her home through the park.

The next day, however, and regret, the look of awe and respect, and the white flower petals on poor Jim's breast, had quite moved the heart of a shrewd, worldly man.

"She was not a little hump," he thought. And he never doubted she would be quite ready to accept the hand he was about graciously to extend. It was a rich man, and had indeed little to