

(NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.)

THE BROKEN SEAL.

A Novel.—By DORA RUSSELL,

Author of "FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW," "THE VICAR'S GOVERNANCE," "OUT OF EDEN," &c.

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CHAPTER L.—(CONTINUED)

And Lily was quite content. She was a very modest girl, this, and did not expect or claim too much devotion from anyone. She was quite sure Alan loved her, for why should he have asked her to be his wife if he had not done so? And this certainty satisfied her. And she was pleased and happy too in the pleasure of her friends. Major Doynes wrote her the warmest letter of congratulation, and Lady Lester was so kind, and her father and mother were both delighted with her engagement. Annette had also kissed her, and said she hoped she would be happy. And Lily was happy. Over her whole existence had shined a new fulness and sweetness, and the golden light of love flooded her heart.

She said something of this to Alan, in her pretty trustful way, one night when he was seeing her home through the park, after she had been dining with Lady Lester.

It was dark; and yet overhead a fitful moon occasionally gleamed out from the heavy drifting clouds, and shone through the green glades in weird white shadows that faded almost as they fell. A wild and gusty night, with the sigh of the wind sighing and moaning, and stirring the great branches of the trees, as with a giant's hand. And as they walked on—three—O, Lily and Alan Lester—the girl clung closer to her lover's arm, gawling timidly amid the strange sounds, the "mournful rustling in the dark" of the mysterious breath of heaven.

"What are you frightened of, little one?" asked Alan, looking down at her with some tenderness, but more kindness, shining in his grey eyes.

"I am not frightened, but I am glad you are with me," she answered, with a little closer, fonder pressure on his arm.

"And you are content, Lily," asked Alan, with sudden gravity, "to spend your life by my side?"

"Why do you say content? That is not the word."

"And what is the word, child?"

"I am happy, happy, happy!" And she laid her head upon his arm.

"I am glad," he said. He stopped, he lifted her face in both his hands; he kissed her, and then suddenly turned away his head, muttering some words she could not hear as he looked up to the dark sky.

It was a promise to be true to her; to give his life to her in return for the sweet gift which she had given him. But, alas, for full humanity, for good and high resolves so easily clouded with day! When they reached the Grange, Lily pressed him to go in, as she said Annette was to be downstairs for the first time that day, and Alan yielded to the temptation.

As she entered the lighted drawing-room, his eyes fell upon the form and face of his old love. Annette was lying on a couch placed near the fire, dressed in a long gown, and her hair was loosely trimmed. She was looking up at him, and in her eyes he saw the gleam of the old love. She was the same girl he had loved so long, and she was the same girl he had loved so long.

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through his whole being, but he did not say many words. Mrs. Doynes watching him with her keen blue eyes was satisfied with his manner. He was grave and courteous, as befitted their relative positions.

Mrs. Doynes had managed everything very cleverly for Annette since her flight from her husband's house. She had written to Sir Rupert's relations to tell them of the sad shock and fright her dear daughter had gone through, and how she had fled for shelter from her husband's maniacal seizure to her father's roof. She had also despatched Annette's father to the house in Grosvenor square to look after her interests, and the Colonel had brought away Annette's jewellery and desired her maid to bring down her wardrobe to Kingsford.

This maid indeed was a burden and a misery to Mrs. Doynes's economic soul when she first arrived at the Grange, but a slight hint which Mrs. Doynes gave, ended this difficulty.

"Oh, mother, I am so ashamed. I never thought of it. Of course, you must allow me to pay for my board and Knightley's?" Annette had said, and Mrs. Doynes did not refuse this offer from her rich daughter.

"You see there will be Lily's trousseau to provide," she said smilingly, as she accepted a sum more than sufficient to supply the whole wants of her modest household. But Annette could very well afford to give this. The large allowance Sir Rupert had always given her was indeed more than she could possibly spend in a quiet place like Kingsford, and her father now saw after the arrangement of her affairs, and with her consent had considerably reduced the establishment in Grosvenor square. Mrs. Doynes had even proposed to shut up the house for a time, and to send the unfortunate mad twin brother of Sir Rupert's also to an asylum. But Annette would not permit this. The late Lady Miles had wished this poor, afflicted son never to be removed from home, and Annette, therefore, determined he should not be disturbed. He was not violent like Sir Rupert, and therefore there was no reason why he should not remain in the rooms he had occupied since his childhood.

For the present it had been settled that Annette was to remain at Kingsford, but Mrs. Doynes began occasionally to talk of the glories of Bliton Hall, Sir Rupert's seat in Middlesex, and to say how delightful it would be to have Annette settled near them in a beautiful place of her own.

Indeed, could the veil have been quite lifted from Mrs. Doynes's worldly heart it would have been seen that she inwardly rejoiced at the misfortune that had happened to her son-in-law, Sir Rupert. It put him out of the way and gave them the benefit of his great wealth, and, besides, Mrs. Doynes had never forgiven him for turning her out of the house!

Annette, too, was thankful to be relieved from the old hateful bondage, but there was still a bitter flavor in her cup, for she could not endure the thought of Lily becoming Alan Lester's wife.

And this evening that Lily brought him to see her was the first time she had seen them together since their engagement. And she was so keen and bitter, shot through Annette's heart as she looked again on the face of her old love, and knew he was about to place an unending bar between them!

But she had learned enough of the lessons of the world to hide her feelings, and in her graceful attractive way she spoke smilingly to Alan, and to the sweet-faced blushing girl by his side.

"It is such a wild night," said Lily, "I was quite frightened as we came through the park."

"And you came through the park?" asked Lady Miles, with a thrill in her voice that echoed back in Alan's heart. "Which path did you come by? I remember them all so well."

"By the great oak with the seat under it," said Lily, unconscious that many and many a time Annette and her lover had sat under this oak; that their last kiss had been given there; that a hundred tender memories lingered round this spot for them both!

"Ah! and did you sit there?" And Annette's lovely hazel eyes sought Alan Lester's face.

"No," he said hastily, almost harshly; and shortly afterwards took leave of them, and went away, returning to the Grange through the dark park, and going to this very seat under the great oak where he and Annette used to meet in the days of their fond love.

He sat down and looked up at the drifting clouds overhead, through which the flicker moonbeams shone in flicker gleams. And the face of Annette—Annette—the one love of all his life—seemed to rise before him, and with a sort of groan he put his hand over his eyes, as if to shut out the mocking vision.

"Why have I seen her again?" he thought. "Why has she come back to destroy my peace?"

Long he sat there—on this very spot Annette's head had lain pillowed on his breast, and could he forget this? Forget it, when he saw her now more beautiful in his eyes even than in those bright hours. She had been false, but she had been deceived, and she loved him still. Had not that madman said she loved him still? Yet they could be nothing to each other—worse than nothing—meeting as near relations, with the unforgotten bond of their old love still burning in their hearts!

And while Alan indulged his bitter thoughts, Annette, in her wayward pretty way, was trying to learn if her young sister's future happiness was really bound up in the prospect of her marriage to Alan. As Lily had gone upstairs to bed, singing a little song in the lightness and joy of her heart, Annette had told her maid to ask her sister to come to her for a little while, and as Lily entered Annette dismissed the maid.

"I will ring when I want you, Knightley," she said. "Come, Lily, let us have a chat, all to ourselves!"

"And what must we chat about?" answered Lily smiling.

"The lover, of course! And are you very happy about this?" she added more seriously, taking Lily's hand; "quite, quite sure you are happy, Lily?"

Lily looked up surprised.

"Yes, I am quite sure," she said.

"It is not the mother who has persuaded you into it, is it? Have you really given your heart, your whole heart, to Alan Lester?"

Lily blushed, knelt down beside her sister and hid her face a moment on her lap.

"Well," said Annette, smoothing back her fair hair, "tell me, do you really love him. Would you be very unhappy if you were parted from him now?"

As Annette asked this question Lily again raised her head and looked at her sister.

"I—I really love him," she said in a low tone. "I—could not live, I think, if anything were to part us now."

"Foolish child! What is there to part you? But go to bed now, dear, I am tired—to-morrow you must tell me all your plans."

CHAPTER LI.—A REFUSAL.

It was but natural that Lady Lester's old friends should call to congratulate her, after Alan's engagement to Lily Doynes was announced, and among these came Lady Elizabeth and Mr. Harford.

"We are so pleased with the news!" smiled Lady Elizabeth, kissing Lady Lester's soft cheeks. "She is a sweet girl."

"I am very happy, I assure you, and very pleased with my new daughter," answered Lady Lester.

"And when has it to be—very soon?" "I have not been told; if they have settled the time, I am not in the secret."

"Oh, I dare say it will be before long," said Lady Elizabeth, thinking at the same moment, "I am quite sure Mrs. Doynes won't be in a hurry to wait."

And Mrs. Doynes had actually begun to reflect about the same time, "Why should they wait?"

There were indeed none of the ordinary reasons for delay. Sir Alan Lester had a large income and a beautiful house to share with his young wife, and his proposed mother-in-law, therefore, did not see why they should defer their happiness.

She had begun to think this one evening

when Sir Alan had dined at the Grange, and when it had pleased Lady Miles to look even more charming than she usually did.

There was an innate coquetry in Annette's character of which indeed she was scarcely conscious; and this coquetry made her wish to please Alan, though she had certainly no intention, after her little conversation with Lily on the subject, of interfering with her young sister's engagement.

"I won't destroy the child's happiness," she had told herself again and again, after Lily had confessed her deep love for Alan. And Annette thought in making this decision that she was acting unselfishly. She knew—what woman does not know—that her old power over Alan was still unchanged. He loved her, but he was bound by honour to marry Lily, and Annette hoped with a sigh they might be very happy, though she knew the idea of his marriage made her very miserable!

But the conflicting emotions of her heart did not prevent her wishing that Alan should nevertheless admire her; that he should understand that she was given up much from a feeling of honour; and though she made no effort to attract his attention beyond wearing a gown that she knew suited her alike in tint and style, and in chatting during dinner, something like the bright attractive Annette of old, still Mrs. Doynes's acute blue eyes saw reasons for hastening on Lily's marriage, and on the morning after Sir Alan had dined with them she asked her young daughter if he had yet mentioned any time when he wished the ceremony to take place.

"Oh, no, mother; it is far too soon to think of that," answered Lily blushing.

"I don't think so, my dear; you remember it is quite three weeks since your sister returned home, and you became engaged just about that time; however we must see about it."

Mrs. Doynes meant that she intended to "see about it," and no doubt would have done so without delay, when Alan Lester was suddenly and unexpectedly summoned from home, and something occurred that for the time put all thought of marriage out of his head.

It must not be supposed that all this while he had forgotten or neglected the unfortunate girl Laura Davis, who was languishing in her prison cell, and over whose life a new interest had dawned for poor Mrs. Lester.

Since Alan's last visit to the Burleigh Arms, Mrs. Lester had been a changed woman. The idea that a child of Jim's might come to her, that she would have something young to love and tend once more, seemed to give her new life. The class she sprang from do not regard illegitimacy as any bar to natural affection, and an unmarried mother in the little country village, where she had been born, was by no means uncommon.

She was prepared, therefore, to receive and cherish the babe that was expected, the moment that it came into the world. And in her open homely way she began to talk of this coming event, and the news at length reached the ears of her old admirer, Captain Daniel Daw, who had seen with daily increasing satisfaction that the lethargy at her grief was passing away, and that Mrs. Lester had begun once more to bustle about the house somewhat in her old cheerful fashion.

And he made up his mind that it was time for him to speak; to declare the love which now for more than twenty-four years had lived in his old, obstinate, stubborn heart. And one day he actually did this. Mrs. Lester had been standing talking to him in the bar, but she took no active part in the business now, and presently retired to the little "blue parlor" behind, to sigh and look at the various photographs of her lost Jim, and to dream of the little Jim she expected, for she had made up her mind that Laura's child would be a boy.

Presently, to her surprise, and with scant ceremony, her old friend the Captain followed her into the parlor.

"Well, Captain," said the kindly creature looking around with a smile, "I hope they've been attending to you?"

"That's all right," answered Daniel gravely, fixing his round, bloodshot eyes on the widow's face, as he had fixed them all through the long years of his unspoken courtship. Then he drew a deep breath, and cleared his throat.

"I've waited a long time," he said.

"Dear me, Captain!" said Mrs. Lester, starting to her feet, "have they not served

you she her Dan hand said, Fo ed, I I brok J Ing J Dan I n wait marri now I my h Jim's Leste I or yo out a hand. watol marry tried ter d N just t you. I ve b and Dar dull p debert cheris "Is ed, in W torred "Ti burst for ye for ye, fooled Mrs. the ms ed he his gla tered I distort absol into th Daw c most li her pa like a He c lodgin and as to die I stagger warehe drawin crane. In a its it- of the o from a the stre in its d was illi Ho w en, aim sympat and wh stimula ing lips sserted bade th Ther he was, borne t and eve his snif But h there-w day or a charact with th one of t "Are the doo "I at ly; "I ocive a hope." Danie this, pe questio these a Mrs. L had a o he died.