

(NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.)

THE BROKEN SEAL.

A Novel—By DORA RUSSELL.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII.—RODDIE'S FISHING ROD.

Lily Doyne had promised Lady Elizabeth to spend the following Tuesday with her during the visit of the cousins to Kingsford, and when that day came she duly arrived at the Rectory.

She found her hostess and the children waiting to receive her, and she had scarcely entered the drawing-room when Master Roddie asked her by the hand.

"Come along with me," he said, "I've got a fish-rod for you."

"He really has," smiled Lady Elizabeth; "but Roddie, my dear, wait awhile. Miss Doyne must rest a little."

"Oh, no, come along," urged the little fellow, pulling Lily by the hand, and nothing would satisfy him but that she should immediately go to inspect this new possession.

To please his cousin, or perhaps the children, Mr. Harford had during the last few days presented them each with a fishing-rod. Lady Elizabeth was touched by this piece of considerate kindness, and when she told her husband of it she added thoughtfully:

"I think he is very fond of little Roddie."

"Yes, my dear," said the Rector, looking up from his book with a smile. "Instead of trying to marry your cousin, which you seem so bent upon, you should be trying to keep him unmarried—for Roddie's sake!"

Lady Elizabeth was silent for a moment; then she said rather in a pained voice:

"You mean he might make Roddie his heir? I would not like to scheme for anything that could only come with Godfrey's death."

The Rector gave a good-tempered shrug.

"What a sentimental young woman you are! My dear, we have all to die, and in my opinion Roddie would make quite as good an heir to Kimmel as any your cousin is likely to have. You should have called your boy Godfrey, Elizabeth, and that might have put the idea into the Squire's head!"

"Now, I know you are joking," said Lady Elizabeth, smiling and laying her hands on her husband's shoulder. "No, I called him after his father—he could have no better name."

There was a tender ring in her voice, and she gently pushed the Rector's dark hair from his white brow as she said this, and looked sadly in his face. Yes, her heart had reproached her of late for not loving him enough; not loving him as well as he deserved. He was so kind, so good—if she were wayward—how reasonable and gentle he always was! The Rector, in truth, regarded women as tender creatures whose faults and failings it became the superior creature, man, to be always forbearing to. He loved his books, and gave "the depth, and not the tumult of the soul," to all he did. This placid, serene nature did not quite suit Lady Elizabeth's warmer one. Her quick emotions sometimes received a little chill, and her quick gaze caught a little check from her even-tempered Rector. Yet he was a good man—she was always ready to acknowledge this—a just, calm, clear-headed man, but he was not led away as she was with sudden fits of magnanimity. It must be admitted, she was a little impatient.

And those, as we have seen, she had her cousin's love, and of this she only repented. She felt she could not make Mr. Harford happier than she could by making Mr. Claxton, but Mr. Claxton was not the perfect union—that of heart and mind—for which Elizabeth's soul hungered. But he was a good man, and she loved him.

Elizabeth began to remember with some self-reproach the blessings of her lot!

She had a very charming man, and said a gracious thing: so pretty that Mr. Claxton seemed well pleased when she told him that his little son could have borne no better name than his own. But he was not demonstrative. He smiled, and then asked his little son about some household expenses! He answered him quietly; but she was disappointed, and as she turned away she thought with a sigh that he would never understand her.

And then Godfrey did not seem to understand either that one woman gets rather tired of hearing perpetually of the affections of another. He had gone over to the Rectory on the day when Lily Doyne was expected there, and Lady Elizabeth admitted to herself she felt a little weary of the manner in which a man of his age kept harping on one string.

The Squire had brought with him a fishing-rod—this one a beautiful light lady's rod—and he gave it to Roddie, and told him he was to give it to Miss Lily Doyne when she came to-morrow, with Master Roddie's love! The child was delighted, and "poor Godfrey looked delighted too," thought Lady Elizabeth with a little scorn.

Mr. Harford had sent to town for this rod, and he had also sent for something else, which he did not mention to his cousin. This was nothing less than a very magnificent diamond ring. And he meant this to be Lily's engagement ring! There were family diamonds, we may be sure, at Kimmel—beautiful glittering things that lay hidden from the light, in their old-fashioned cases—and the Squire had looked at his diamonds lately, and had thought very kindly, as he did so, when he hoped that these jewels would silence round the fair young throat of his wife.

Then he ordered some rings down from town to choose from, and he scarcely would have liked to have admitted to Lady Elizabeth how much he paid for the one he selected. But he was a rich man, a very rich man, and to his mind nothing was too good for the dear little girl on whom he had chosen to fix his affections.

Lady Elizabeth had, of course, invited him to lunch to meet Lily, and he meant to propose to her on this very day. He went armed, therefore, with his ring in his waistcoat pocket, and he was only waiting for a fit opportunity to place it on her slender finger, but somehow the opportunity would not come.

Roddie talked the whole time at lunch about the fishing-rod and fishing, and when the Squire proposed they should all go out and try their luck in the new pond, he hoped somehow to get rid of the children, but he hoped in vain. Roddie pined worse than a leech! He kept tight hold of Lily's hand, and related again and again his past experiences. He had had a nibble yesterday, he had seen a "catch" this morning, and so on, and the Squire with the ring as it were burning a hole in his waistcoat pocket, wished with all his might that Master Roddie would hold his tongue.

At last they all began to fish; all but the Squire, who hung tenderly over Lily directing her how to hold her rod. In summer, and when the banks got green, the new pond was likely to turn out a pretty spot, now it must be admitted it was rather slimy. One of the girls was sent by Mr. Harford for a camp stool for Lily, and a spawl on which to place her feet. He arranged this carefully, and then Roddie sat down upon it and refused to be dislodged. A man can't propose with a little monkey of between four and five listening "starry" word, and so Mr. Harford felt it was no use to attempt at this moment. He therefore gave his attention to his fishing-rod, and suddenly Lily cried out something "was pulling" at her, and the Squire took it gently from her hand,

and landed a little wretched, struggling fish. "Poor little thing! Oh, please put it back!" cried Lily, covering her eyes, for she could not bear to see the suffering of any living thing.

Roddie, greatly excited, threw down his rod, and tried to seize the little fish with an exultant cry, but the Squire pushed him aside.

"Keep off, little fellow," he said, and with great gentleness he then released the small roach from its unhappy position, and flung it back into the water, looking round to Lily with a smile.

"Does that please some one's tender little heart?" he asked, and as she thanked him looking so sweet and fair the while, the Squire would very much have liked to send Master Roddie after the roach, if he could only have got him out of the way.

"I don't think you care for fishing," he said to Lily; "come, let us take a turn round the garden, and have a look at Lady Elizabeth's cows."

"Me come too—me show 'em the cows," cried Roddie, again seizing Lily's hand, and leaving his rod to take care of itself.

"Don't you think, my boy, you had better go to your mother for awhile," said Mr. Harford, persuasively, "and tell her how Miss Lily caught a fish, and all about it, you know?"

Roddie shook his head sagaciously. "Me tell her where Miss 'Lily's gone. Me take Miss 'Lily now to see the cows."

There was, indeed, no escape from him, and the Squire was obliged to make the best of the situation. After all, a man might be in a worse position than walking in the trim rectory garden, sheltered on each side by the tall, neatly clipped "ew hedges," with a pretty girl he was in love with by his side, even though an irrepressible wrangler also accompanied them.

It was so sweet and still here, and the birds were already singing on the leafless boughs, and the grass borders showing signs of the coming spring. Mr. Claxton was a great gardener among his other good qualities, and his flower-beds were all prepared for their bright tenants of the summer time, and over the whole place there was an air of order and serenity that somehow reminded you of the Rector himself.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.—(CONTINUED)

Lady Elizabeth had not gone out with the others to the fishing-pond. She had told her cousin with a smile that she must take care of Miss Doyne. But the nearest to her own heart had prevented her settling to her ordinary duties, and as Mr. Harford, Lily and Roddie (prattling as he went) were on their way to inspect Lady Elizabeth's cows, they came on that lady herself, walking pensively up and down by one of the tall yew hedges.

"Here we are, Elizabeth!" cried the Squire to attract her attention; and she at once turned round and joined them.

"We're tired of sport," said the Squire with his genial laugh, "and so we are going to turn our attention to agriculture, or rather to the cows."

"Me," said Roddie, leaving Lily's hand, and seizing his mother's gown, "I've caught a fish—and he's (and he's) put it back again, and Roddie wanted it for dinner."

"That was very kind of Cousin Godfrey," said Lady Elizabeth.

"It would have been cruel to keep such a little thing, Roddie," said Lily; "it was only a little baby fish, like Roddie."

But Roddie repeated the comparison.

"Me not a baby," he said; "me a boy, and me got a fishing-rod and a caving-box—could you do any more saving-box, Miss 'Lily'?"

Master Roddie frequently made this polite offer to the Squire at the Rectory, going into the drawing-room with his savings-box under his arm, to the discomfort of Lady Elizabeth, until he was positively forbidden to do so by the Rector. Since then his savings had considerably fallen off, therefore there was a natural desire on his part to exhibit his box, if he had a proper opportunity.

"Roddie!" said his mother reprovingly, and giving her head a gentle shake as she spoke.

"Oh, me, me don't 'ant Miss 'Lily to put anything into it—unless she likes."

The Squire gave a loud laugh at this hint, and produced a shilling, which Roddie was not too proud to take. But Lady Elizabeth scolded her cousin.

"You spoil him, Godfrey; you give him far too much money."

After this they went to see the cows—two gentle sweet-breathed creatures, that were especial favorites of Lady Elizabeth—for they were the gifts of her cousin Godfrey. They were of the pure Alderney breed, and looked at her with their mild brown eyes, with evident kindly recognition. But like the Rector, they were not demonstrative. They went on placidly with their munched turnips even while she fondled their shapely heads.

"You make us envy your cows, Elizabeth," said Mr. Harford, "happy specimens of contented placidity."

"You have not a placid nature, Godfrey," smiled Lady Elizabeth.

"Have I not, my dear? It's difficult for a man to know his own nature; but I think I would prefer a quiet life."

Lady Elizabeth suppressed a little sigh. To tell the truth, she did not think that Godfrey was going exactly the right way to secure a "quiet life."

There was a pretty green field round the dairy and cow-house, and from this spot you caught a glimpse of the square, grey tower of Kimmel Church, up which the ivy crept and flourished. The whole scene made a pretty picture—a country plot full of repose and peace.

"What a charming place this is, Lady Elizabeth," said Lily, looking admiringly around.

"It's a nice old-fashioned place," she answered.

"Everything about Kimmel is old-fashioned," remarked the Squire.

"I like old-fashioned things best," said Lily, with her large eyes still fixed on the grey church tower, and somehow these simple words jarred on Lady Elizabeth's ears.

"I fear she is a little forward," she thought; "she evidently wishes to flatter Godfrey."

Then Lady Elizabeth proposed they should go into the house and have some tea, and they went, and Godfrey Harford still had his ring-box in his waistcoat pocket! But he was going to drive Lily home. The Squire had been ordered to make their appearance at the Rectory at five o'clock, and the Squire hoped to be able to whisper some word in Lily's ear, in spite of the groom behind them, as they drove on their way.

And he kept to his resolution even after they started. A soft dusky shade was now stealing over the landscape, and the Squire, who was an excellent whip, was not distracted by his ponies. There was nothing to prevent him then saying the momentous words, and he would say them. He felt his ring-box under his ever-coat, and he cleared his throat and took courage.

"I have something here," he began, placing his gloved hand over that part of his person where the heart is usually supposed to beat, but Mr. Harford was not alluding to his heart just at this moment, but to his diamond ring; "that I hope to induce you to accept, Miss Lily?"

This address was sufficiently alarming to a shy young girl, and Lily moved uneasily on her seat, and blushed deeply.

"It's only a trifle," continued the Squire, unbuttoning his coat with one hand, and holding the ring, of course, with the other, "but I want you to understand—why I declare, here are your father and mother!"

Yes, actually there—just where Mr. Harford was going to declare what he wanted Lily to understand—there, advancing along the highway toward them came Colonel and Mrs. Doyne. The evening was fine, and Mrs. Doyne had persuaded her husband to walk a little way towards Kimmel to meet Lily, and unluckily did meet her at the very moment when the Squire was going to propose!

Very friendly greetings were now exchanged, and Mr. Harford insisted upon driving the ladies home, so Mrs. Doyne took the seat in front beside him, and the groom was turned out, and Lily and her father at behind. They had a very pleasant drive, all but the Squire, who was conscious of a feeling of defeat somehow; he had not said what he wanted to say, and there was that ring in his pocket still!

When they reached Kingsford Mrs. Doyne felt it would be impossible for her to ask Mr. Harford to remain to dine with them, for she knew the Squire was a great epicure, and she knew also that their Sunday's joint was yet due duty. She therefore vaguely said, she hoped they would see him some day soon, and they all parted on friendly