

[NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.]

THE BROKEN SEAL

A Novel.—By DORA RUSSELL,

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CHAPTER VIII.—"JIM."

Young James Lester did not leave quite such a disagreeable impression on Alan Lester after he left Roden as he had done on his arrival there. The young man had gone intending to assert himself, but he found he had no reason to do this. He had never been in the society before of such people as Lady Lester and her son. Their grave kindness and courtesy, their quiet acknowledgment of his just claims, was so different to what he had expected that James Lester felt a little ashamed of having suspected that they would cheat him if they could.

Mr. Chaplin had warned him to be "on his guard," but as he and Alan drove back to the station after the funeral was over to join poor Mrs. Lester, young Jim found himself chatting almost at his ease to his newly-found kinsman.

"What must I call you?" he said, looking with his laughing blue eyes in Alan's grave face. "Uncle?"

"Yes, that will do very well," smiled Alan.

"And I say, uncle, then—you know I've not been brought up like you and that lot; but you'll help me a bit, won't you? And I want to say something else. I—I think you've acted splendidly about this affair—it's awful hard lines on you, you know—and, of course, the lawyers must arrange about money; about your fortune and share of the property, I mean."

"Well, something, perhaps, can be arranged," answered Alan, thinking of Annette.

"Of course there can—something brand-new—and you'll write and tell me when I may come again."

"I wished to speak to you about that—of course you can come whenever you like, for Roden is yours—but my mother is a great invalid, and it will take a few weeks to put the Dower House which was settled on her at the time of her marriage, in order, and I am going to ask you not to hurry her out of her old home."

"Of course not, if she would like to stay always—"

"That would not do," answered Alan, with his grave smile; "you will be bringing another Lady Lester home there some day—but give us one month."

"There is no hurry; none at all," said young James; but Alan noticed a change had passed over his face, a little cloud.

But they parted on very friendly terms, and Mrs. Lester wrung Alan's hand, and looked up appealingly in his face with her blue eyes as she bade him good-bye.

"Be kind to my boy, sir," she said, as they stood a moment together on the platform alone, Jim Lester having gone to get the tickets; "you see he's not been brought up to all this, and he's been a wild lad. I'll be glad when he's out of Plymouth, and perhaps for the sake of his poor father you'll look after him a bit."

"I'll do my best to be kind to my young nephew," said Alan; "he'll soon get used to the different life."

"I don't know," sighed the simple, kindly woman; "it takes a deal of polishing to make a real gentleman, but perhaps having you before him, he'll improve quicker—and God bless you, reward you, sir, for your kindness and respect to my poor John!" and the blue eyes filled with tears as she wrung Alan's hand.

He saw the mother and son safely away in the train, and then returned to the Court, thinking not unkindly as he walked there of the lad who had so unexpectedly appeared and taken from him home and heritage. His mother was watching for him, and (as it always did) her face brightened as he went to her.

There was something quite beautiful, something far beyond the common mother-love, which so beautifies and elevates the most ordinary daughters of Eve, in the love

that Lady Lester gave her only son. She had borne him a second time, as it were, in the long and terrible agonies which his boyish carelessness had inflicted upon her. The heroic efforts which she had made to conceal her pain so as to spare him had doubly endeared this son of her love to her heart.

Even now at times these bent limbs of hers were racked with suffering, but Lady Lester never allowed Alan to see her when it was so. She invented some tender fable; she had a headache or neuralgia; her boy must not know that his mother still suffered a martyrdom of pain through him.

Every noble character has more or less a good and high influence. Alan had grown up close to a very noble woman, and something of her nature—the brave, strong, enduring nature—had become his, either from her lofty example, or the mysterious hereditary trace which appears alike for evil or for good. And now in this bitter hour of trial both Lady Lester and Alan acted with dignity and calmness.

The first shock was over, and they had done right. The poor prodigal son who had wandered away from the place of his birth twenty-three years ago, bringing shame and fear then had come back to bring pain, if not shame again. John Lester in life and in death had cost his own people much. But neither Lady Lester nor Alan had spoken against him, and they were ready now to act kindly to his son.

"And what did you think of him, Alan?" asked Lady Lester, alluding to James Lester.

"I think he's not very bad," answered Alan, with a little laugh.

"There is something about his eyes—that laughing look, and the bright, blue tint, and dark lashes, that reminds me of poor John."

"He seemed rather injured because I told him I thought he was like his mother—but I think he is all right—of course he wants what his poor mother called 'polishing up.'"

"Did she really say that?"

"She did, indeed, but she's a good soul; she asked me to be kind to him, and Master Jim himself requested leave to call me uncle—so don't forget, mother mine, I am now advanced to the rank of 'Uncle Alan.'"

"Well, dear, I know you will be kind to him."

"I'll be a good boy and try," answered Alan, smiling.

"Oh! you will, and when is he coming here?"

"He was nice about that, he said there was no hurry, you might always stay here, but I suggested he would be bringing another Lady Lester, some day, and my young gentleman's face fell. I hope he has got into no trouble at Plymouth, for his mother seemed very anxious to get him out of it."

"Well, ask him here?"

"Not yet awhile, mother, but we may make the best of him, he is the head of the house, now; and I hope he won't bring any low-born demotelle here to share his honors."

"That would be a great misfortune."

Alan gave a little shrug.

"Yet it's almost what we may expect. But still he's so young—we must hope better things for him."

It will be thus seen that both the mother and the son were prepared to be kind to James Lester, and receive him as their near kinsman. And Lady Lester was anxious, as soon as possible now, to leave the Court. She gave Alan his choice.

"If you wish it, my dearest boy," she said, "I will not furnish the Dower House, but take one in town. What do you think? Would you be happier away?"

For a moment Alan hesitated. Personally, he would have been happier away from the sight of the lands that he had so long held as his own. But would his mother care to go among strangers? He felt sure that

she would not, and that she was thinking of him, wishing to spare him any further annoyance and pain when she suggested leaving Roden.

"No, mother," he said, after a moment's thought, "let us stay among our old friends;" and Lady Lester was only too glad to do so.

And when these friends heard what had happened to Alan Lester—how Sir John's eldest son, whom some of them remembered so well, had died only a few days ago, instead of twenty-three years, as it had been so long and firmly believed, and that he had left a son—there was real and universal sympathy expressed on all sides for Lady Lester and her son.

Alan was a man greatly respected and liked by his fellow-men. Everyone around Roden had a good word for him, and knew of the great grief that had saddened his youth. And now to have his title taken from him and his estates, after he had enjoyed them so long! "It was shameful, really disgusting," said many a country squire, but when they met Alan their hand-grip was warmer and more cordial than it had ever been.

At first after his great change of fortune was known, Alan felt it painful and annoying to meet his neighbors. But in a little while this feeling wore off. After all, he thought, there was no disgrace; there would have been disgrace had he kept his position, and felt ashamed to look in his wife's brother's face. Frank Doyme had done his duty as an honest gentleman to the dead soldier, and it only remained for Alan to do his. The family lawyer came and urged and urged in vain. But he could not deny that the evidence was conclusive.

"Still I would fight for it, Sir Alan," he said.

"And cheat my dead brother?" answered Alan, a little haughtily, and before he left Roden, the lawyer held out his hand to Alan with respect and admiration in his world-worn heart.

"You are a very honourable man," he said, and he could give him no higher praise.

By an arrangement with Alan, this Mr. Lowden, the lawyer, met young James Lester in town a few days later to transact some necessary legal business, the details of which need not be recorded here. As Alan had been, Mr. Lowden was not on the whole unfavorably impressed by young James. Let his letter to Alan speak.

"I met the young man, whom I suppose we must now call Sir James Lester," wrote the lawyer, "at Mr. Saltwell's chambers, and I must confess I was agreeably disappointed. I remember his father, and he somehow reminds me of him. He is disposed to be generous as regards money, and spoke in very high terms of yourself. He is a gay youth, however—would have led my discreet footsteps and gray head into amusements quite unsuited to my years, always offering to 'stand treat,' as he called it, which I assured him was quite unnecessary."

However, the upset of Mr. Lowden's visit to town was this; one thousand a year was to be secured out of the property for Alan Lester and his heirs after him, as his portion as a younger son; and Lady Lester was to take what she pleased of the furniture and plate belonging to the Court to her own house.

Young James was ready to agree to whatever the lawyers proposed. He had a lawyer to represent his interests by Mr. Lowden's wish, and Mr. Lowden represented Alan's. Lady Lester retained her horses and carriages, and as she had seven (hundred a year under her marriage settlement, their affairs began to look very different to what they had done in the first shock of the news, which seemed to deprive Alan of everything.

In the meanwhile, Alan was thinking constantly of his young love. He had had two notes from Annette Doyme since the evening he had met her in the park, and in each she had told him she was "so unhappy" about him, and that she "really cared" for him, and so on. But she also told him that her mother was very angry with him. "She says you cannot care for me, Alan," wrote Annette, "or you would not have let this horrid young man take every thing from you without a struggle. I would like to see you, but mother is always watching me. Oh! it's miserable. I cannot tell how it may end."

A feeling of honor had prevented Alan urging Annette to meet him again until his affairs were more settled, though he was determined not to allow Mrs. Doyme's opposi-

tion to stand in his way. And one day he met Lily Doyme, and the young girl made him very happy.

Lily was hardly seventeen, but had a fervid imagination and a tender heart. This loss so terrible, so overwhelming, and borne so bravely by Alan Lester, strongly appealed to the young enthusiasm, which had not yet been damped down by the hard realities of life. This child did not know of the cares, the daily anxieties, which her father and mother knew. To her they appeared cruel and hard to part Annette from her love, just because he was poor. "They could say nothing against him but that," argued Lily, not knowing a sin or two can be easily gilded over to minds like Mrs. Doyme's.

Thus, one day, when she saw Alan riding slowly on before her in a country lane, Miss Lily who was in general one of the shyest of maidens, actually ran after him and overtook him, breathless, blushing and ashamed.

"Lily!" said Alan with a glad, pleased smile, when he turned round and saw her; and he dismounted, and slipped his arm through the reins, and walked by her side.

"I—I—saw you," panted Lily, not looking in his face, but speaking eagerly and tremblingly, "and I wanted to tell you—how—how I honour you, Sir Alan!"

Again Alan smiled, and looked at her very kindly.

"You must drop the Sir Alan now, Lily," he said, "and call me Alan."

"Yes, I know; but that does not make any difference to me. At least, I think more highly of you still, and so, I am sure, does Annette."

"That makes me very happy, Lily."

"Mother has been very unkind to her, and Annette has been so unhappy about you—you can't think how unhappy—but I tell her just to wait patiently and something will come up. Don't you believe in things coming up?"

"Yes," said Alan, with a little laugh, "something will come up; tell Annette from me, Lily, she need not be afraid; we shall manage somehow." And he thought of the negotiations being carried on in London by Mr. Lowden.

"That's what I tell her—and—and—you have given her so much, I am sure you have given her so much!"

Lily's fair face was crimson with excitement, and her large eyes shined with the fullness of her soul. Alan looked at her, touched and half amused. Never before had this young girl spoken to him except in monosyllables. He had regarded her as a shy, lovely child, who seldom raised those beautiful eyes of hers, yet here she was talking quite learnedly on a theme which scarcely ought yet to have entered her innocent head.

"Yes," he said the next moment, tenderly and deferentially, looking at her with his clear eyes, "I have given her all I have to give, Lily—no man can love Annette more truly than I do."

"I know that—I am sure of it!" And she held out her trembling hand to him. "I know you will never change."

CHAPTER IX.—SIR JAMES.

As it may be easily imagined, the strange history of John Lester had been almost as much discussed in the humble circle round his wife, as among the higher class to which he had originally belonged.

Rose, the barmaid (who had been selected for her ugliness by Mrs. Lester, for a very good reason that her son Jim was not to be trusted in the neighborhood of a pretty face), had been questioned and cross questioned during the absence of Mrs. Lester in the North, but the poor girl, who was one of the most honest and faithful creatures that ever lived, simply said, she "knew nothing about it."

Mr. Chaplin, the lawyer's clerk, was, however, not so discreet. This young man talked at the bar of the "Burling Arms," and talked at "Davis' Billiard Rooms" of the wonderful good fortune which had befallen "Jim Lester," until all the usual attendants at these two places knew the story, and naturally were very much interested about it.

Captain Daniel Dow heard it, and a dull feeling of rage and fear entered his heart. But he was slow to believe; "a mere fool's tale," he told himself, and it was not until Mrs. Lester returned; not until she stood before his eyes, arrayed in her deep mourning, with her widow's cap on her head, and its long white streamers floating over her broad shoulders, that he realised that the