

(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.

[THE RIGHT OF TRANSLATION IS RESERVED.]

CHAPTER XLIV.—(CONTINUED.)

She therefore, (after a word to her Rector, who was always glad to escape country visitings), despatched her nets to Kingsford Grange, and when her cousin came in during the evening she told him that she had done so.

"I am sorry for that, Elizabeth," said Godfrey Harford. "I had hoped to have seen you there."

"But you are not going, Godfrey; surely you are not going?"

A sort of dusky blush stole over the Squire's face.

"I have accepted the invitation."

"Oh! Godfrey, I am so sorry. You can't wish—"

"My dear, don't be alarmed; I neither wish nor hope," answered the Squire, with rather a dismal little laugh, "but I don't see why one should quarrel with people merely because a little girl has had taste, you know, Elizabeth!"

Lady Elizabeth got up, and restlessly moved about her drawing room.

"I am certain why she had had taste, Godfrey," she said presently, "she is in love with Alan Lester; you remember I told you so."

"You have no right to say so, Elizabeth," said the squire, gravely.

Lady Elizabeth's face flushed; she was unused to reproof and did not like it.

"Well, we won't quarrel about it," she said, after a moment's silence going up to her cousin with her charming smile, "I know she was a very silly girl to refuse my cousin Godfrey."

He held out his kind hand to her.

"I can't expect every one to think as well of me as you, my dear," she said, and then she changed the conversation, and Lady Elizabeth was sorry that she had made such a mistake in sending her reply to Kingsford Grange.

And Miss Doane was no doubt comforted to learn that Mr. Harford was coming to her dinner party, and at once proceeded to engage the professional cook and waiters on whom she had fixed to assist at her entertainment. But she noticed that Lily took no real interest in the preparations. She was restless and unsettled during the next few days, and did not seem to care to stay much indoors. She had not seen Alan Lester for nearly a week—not since that happy day in Barnaby Wood—and never had time seemed so long to her young heart.

But on the afternoon of the day before the entertainment at Kingsford that had already cost Mrs. Doane so much thought, expense and disappointment, she despatched her young daughter to a neighbouring gardener's who had a small greenhouse for the purpose of purchasing some

flowers on a sharp thunderstorm as Lily was turning, and like many sensitive people had a great awe, if not fear, of this storm overtook the poor girl

read, though for some time the long clouds rising against the

peculiar shuddering motion of the disturbed flight of the

warned her of its approach.

and her steps, she almost ran, and her face came darkly on, faster

and by from them. Then a boom of thunder rolled overhead,

and the sky was rent with

of flame.

frightened. She hurried between two high

either side of the road,

that came to some tall

she could take shelter, lit

again the fierce lightning leaped out in its wild play.

Drenched and terrified, she at last saw a tall elm standing in a field close to the roadway, and, opening the gate of the field, she took refuge under the tree, clinging to the trunk in her great fear, and while she stood thus she heard a horse galloping along the roadway, and looking up, she saw Alan Lester riding past the gate of the field in the drenching rain.

"Alan! Alan!" she cried, forgetting everything but her love and fear, "come back for shelter!"

He looked round, at the sound of her voice, and recognised her white gown, and in a moment pulled up his horse, dismounted, and entered the "—"

He went up to the tree, with his arm through his horse's bridle, and at once caught Lily's hand.

"Come out at once, Lily," he said; "it is dangerous to stand under trees in a storm."

"I'm so afraid," she half-sobbed.

"Don't be afraid," he said kindly. "Here, I'll fasten June to the gate—she'll rear a bit, but it can't be helped, and you come a little further down the road with me."

She obeyed him without a word, clinging to his arm, and feeling now a sort of strange pleasure in the danger when he was near her, when she was sharing it with him.

Alan put his arm round her, and sheltered her as best he could.

"Shut your eyes, Lily," he said, as the bright lightning flashed around them, "and I will take care of you."

He felt to her very much like he would have felt to a little child thrown on his protection in the same plight. But Lily, conscious, being, trembling, leaned against him, with a throbbing breast, and with a sweet and delicious joy flooding her heart.

CHAPTER XLV.—THE FIRST KISS.

The storm lasted quite half an hour, and during this half hour Alan Lester had time to realise that he was holding a young girl very closely to his breast whom he had been told had given to him unsought her pure and innocent love.

And a feeling of tenderness unconsciously came over him as her little cold, chill, hand tightly clasped his, and as he felt her breast throbbing against his own.

"Are you very frightened now, Lily?" he asked, bending his head down closer to her's.

"No—not now."

"Is that because I am taking care of you?"

"Yes."

The little merrymable came flustering out, and the girl moved nervously in his arms as she whispered it, and Alan could see the fair brow (from which her hat had been brushed back) grow pinker and pinker.

The rest of her face was hidden, but he knew she was blushing deeply, and her evident emotion—perhaps her young beauty and sweetness—stirred so strong a feeling in his own heart that the next moment he clasped her still closer to him.

"And would you like me always to take care of you, always to love you?" he whispered, his lips close to her cheek.

Again she stirred in his arms, and her breath came short. Then, suddenly, she looked up in his face, and in her large grey eyes he read her answer.

"Well," he said, gently, and with a kind, half sad smile, "won't you tell me, Lily? Would you like me to take care of you all your life?"

"Yes."

He could scarcely hear her answer, but he knew it was spoken. He bent down, and kissed her; he bound his lips to hers.

"It shall be so then, my dear," he said, "I will do my best."

He meant he would do his best to make her happy, to guard her from all possible ill. This was the feeling he had to her—not love—not the love, at least, with which he had loved Annette. That master-paean had filled his whole being, and every thought and hope at one time had been bound up in the frail faith that had been too weak to face the storm.

But Lily did not pause to analyse his feelings. An intense joy almost over-powered her, and she began to tremble violently from the excess of her emotion.

"What is the matter? Are you frightened still, dear?"

"No, I'm so happy, so happy—if you love me!"

Her agitation, her words, half-frightened Alan.

"You silly little girl!" he said, and once more he kissed her. "But look, Lily, there's a raft of blue in the sky, the storm is nearly past."

Then Lily looked up from his breast, and all the world was changed to her! He was going to love her and take care of her all her life, and there was nothing but joy for her for evermore! What a beautiful world it was—the rain, pattering down on the green meadowlands, and on the lovely Hawthorn bloom, the dark clouds rolling sullenly away, and the blue rift spreading and spreading—all seemed most exquisite to the girl enamoured eyes. She forgot her clinging wet gown, her hat battered out of shape and comeliness; she forgot that Alan was also wet through, and that poor June was tied to the gate. She would willingly have stayed there on the muddy roadway, but luckily Alan had more common sense.

"You must run home now, Lily," he said, "as fast as you can. Oh! how wet you are, my poor child!"

"And look at mother's flowers!" laughed Lily, "they are all broken to pieces."

"Were they for the grand dinner-party to-morrow?" smiled Alan. "Well, never mind, dear, I will send you some down to-morrow morning."

"And you are not coming?" said Lily wistfully.

"No, I like you best alone, Lily; but when shall I see you again?"

"Oh, anytime."

"Well, to-morrow you'll be busy, but the day after to-morrow will you go down by the lake in the park about eleven in the morning, and then we must talk over our plans."

"Yes, and Alan—"

"Well, dear?"

"Don't say anything to anyone, please, for a long time yet—I want—"

"What, you shy little child?"

"I want to be happy all to myself—to know you love me without anyone else knowing it. I could not bear it to be talked about, for other people to know, for ever so long."

He understood the sensitive shrinking love which prompted this request. Lily was afraid of her mother; afraid of commonplace congratulations; of the pride and satisfaction with which she knew the news of her engagement would be received at home. She remembered how it was when Alan had asked Annette to be his wife; how Mrs. Doane had called on her friends and told them she knew within a week. And Lily remembered also how when trouble had come to her mother had been as eager as she to tell the engagement as she had once told her about it.

So she wished to have her happiness "all to herself," as she called it, for at least a little while, at any rate, as sacred, too pure, to be intruded upon. And Alan, it must be admitted, was very glad to escape the formidable, though necessary, interviews with Colonel and Mrs. Doane as long as possible. Yet, still, he had gone through this ordeal once, and his recollection of certain grasping inquiries was not a pleasant one.

He, therefore, willingly agreed to Lily's "little Lily's" request.

"Very well," he said, "no one shall be told at present; but you're not to forget, you know, Lily!"

Again she looked up to him, and Alan once more drew her to his breast.

"Good-bye, dear," he said; "may I see you at home?"

"I won't forget the flowers."

And Lily did run home, arriving there wet, rosy, smiling and happy, and was received by her anxious mother, who had been very uneasy at the idea of her being out in such a storm.

"My dear, where have you been? I've been miserable about you!"

Lily was indeed in a sorry plight as regards her dress, which was specked with mud and saturated with rain.

"What a state you are in—and the poor flowers!"

"Never mind, mother," brightly smiled Lily. "I met Sir Alan Lester, and he said he would send you some flowers down to-morrow morning."

"Well, that was very civil of him. Did he tell you why he refused the invitation?"

"No—I suppose he does not care for parties. He goes out very seldom, you know, mother."

"Perhaps. Well, dear, get off your wet things, and then you must tell me all your adventures. I'm sure I am glad to see you safe at home again."

But Lily told her mother nothing more. She had met Sir Alan, and he had promised her some flowers. Mrs. Doane, however, was quite quick to see that something very pleasant to Lily had occurred during her wet walk. Instead of the languid interest she had displayed yesterday about the coming entertainment, Lily was now full of interest and excitement over the preparations. And when Alan kept his promise, and the head gardener at the Court arrived next morning at Kingsford with a basket of most beautiful flowers, Lily went dancing about the house unable to conceal her joy.

She arranged these flowers herself, touching the delicate blossoms with her small, sensitive hands with lingering tenderness. Lily had a great liking for flowers—gifts sweet and precious to us poor mortals; fresh and fair in this sin-stained world as they bloomed in Eden! A room without flowers, to my mind, is always dull and uninviting. They brighten existence, and the rich and poor can alike enjoy them, for the wild flowers of our English fields yield a rich harvest to a loving eye.

And these came from Alan, from her lover, her love! In this child's nature there was a vein of hero-worship—thatfulness of the soul that idealises the being it adores. She did not see Alan as he really was; he was quite noble and faultless in her eyes. He had borne the loss of fortune with a proud smile, and showed the kindest interest and regard for the poor youth who had supplanted him.

Lily knew nothing of the sinking of spirit, of the bitter pain with which Alan had relinquished his inheritance. He had done it because it was just and right, and he was too proud a man to make a display of his feelings. Thus the great heart-break that had come to him, when Annette had flung his love away, was never perfectly understood by Lily. He had borne this bravely, as he had borne the other, but it had changed his heart. He had no blind faith now in any living soul. He had smiled a little sadly, perhaps a little cynically, even when he had parted with his Lily after her sweet kiss on the muddy road.

He was once more Sir Alan Lester, and he thought of the time when Annette had loved Sir Alan too, and then transferred her kisses when his title and fortune had passed away. Would this child have done the same? He was half-ashamed to ask himself the question; ashamed of ungenerous doubts, when he remembered her fresh, innocent face, and yet Annette had seemed to him so fresh and innocent too!

A bitterness of which he was conscious had in fact dimmed the original nobleness and trustfulness of his soul. But Lily never dreamed of this; to her he was "the goodliest man of men," and she the happiest maiden to have won his love!

It is an old saying that there is no beauty draught like happiness, and it might be this which made her seem so fair when the guests began to assemble at Kingsford on the occasion of Mrs. Doane's notable dinner-party. Everything hitherto had gone right during the preparations. The hired cook had kept sober, and the two hired waiters supplied by the house in town, from which Mrs. Doane had borrowed her silver and cutlery, had arrived; the leading man being tall and of elegant port, who looked as though a joke was impossible to him, for his stern lips never relaxed, and his unbending eyes were fixed immovably on his duties. The lesser man was red-haired, and if he had not been a waiter might perhaps have been guilty of some human frailties. Both were irreproachable, however, in dress and bearing, and Mrs. Doane sitting at the head of her flower-decked table, felt rewarded for all her trouble, and