

[NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.]

THE BROKEN SEAL.

A Novel.—By DORA RUSSELL,

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CHAPTER II.

THE BEARER OF ILL NEWS.

The next morning, when the sky was quite blue, and the air full of the strange, sad sweetness which blows through the breath of the waning year, Major Doyme found himself walking slowly among the domains of Ronden Court. A rich, fair country this—the green pasture lands, the broad fields of yellow stubble, from which the garnered grain was gone; the wide park, where the deer stole through the ferny undergrowth beneath the old trees, or slaked their thirst in the still waters of the lake. It was a beautiful and stately home to which Sir Alan Lester hoped soon to bring his fair young bride, and with a bowed head and a heavy step Major Doyme passed down the elm avenue that led to the house, on his distasteful errand.

He had walked from the nearest railway station, having travelled direct from Gortmouth, without telling his family he meant to visit Midlandshire. He wished to see Alan Lester alone, before any other human being knew of the strange incident that had happened yesterday. He felt that this was but just to Alan; that Alan might be able to throw some light on his eldest brother's supposed death, that even would disprove the dead soldier's story.

And when he came in sight of the court—a grand old house, standing on its broad terrace, with the October sun shining down on the changing foliage of the woods, on the green lawns, and glowing flower beds—this hope suddenly grew stronger. It might be some trick, some scheme. How unlikely that the real owner of such a place would have hidden himself for years in the lowly position and humble garb in which this man had lived and died!

This idea was so consoling to Major Doyme, that when he saw Lady Lester and her son out on the terrace in front of the house, he advanced to meet them without the same shrinking that he had felt when he first approached Roden. Lady Lester was sitting in a Bath chair, and Sir Alan reading a newspaper by her side. Major Doyme could see them look at each other and smile as he approached unseen, for a very tender affection existed between the mother and her son.

There was a story attached to these two—so sad a story that it had darkened Alan Lester's youth with the shadow of an unending regret. When he was between nineteen and twenty years of age, in the flush of his young and happy manhood, he had one day insisted upon driving his mother out with a pair of young and spirited horses. His father had laughingly advised Lady Lester not to trust herself with Alan, and this had spurred the lad's mettle, and he easily persuaded his fond mother to go with him. Lady Lester was a very handsome woman at this time, tall and fully developed, and Alan was proud of his mother, and loved to be seen with her. But that winter morning when he drove her out, wrapped in her sables, smiling, happy, along the country lanes, which the breath of the frost had just touched with rime, was destined to be the last drive that Lady Lester ever took. A cruel disaster happened. Something startled the young horses, and they took flight, and passing Alan was not an experienced enough driver to manage them. At all events, the high phaeton in which they were driving was overturned, and when Alan, stunned and bruised, contrived to struggle to his feet from the hard ground on which he had been thrown, such a glare met his eyes that the memory of it could never fade again.

They were lifting his mother up from a heap of stones by the wayside, to all appearances dead. Lady Lester had been flung out as the carriage overturned, and the struggling horses had dragged it over

her. She was frightfully injured; both legs broken, and for long it was feared that some internal hurt which she had received would prove fatal.

Perhaps the agonized prayers of the poor boy were heard; perhaps the fond mother's love which filled Lady Lester's heart made her able to support, for his sake, the miserable pain that she heroically endured. But her life was spared. She recovered, but she was a cripple; her fine form bent, one leg a little shorter than the other; but her face more beautiful still. It was like the face of an angel, Alan sometimes thought, so full of pity, tenderness, and great, immortal love.

These two had loved each other before, but after this dreadful accident their love increased three-fold. But it blighted Alan's youth. He became grave from gay—a sad, serious man, while his moustache was still young.

Eleven years had passed since then; Alan Lester was now thirty-one, tall, and well-formed, with grey eyes and a pleasant face. And as Major Doyme's approaching footsteps fell on his ears he looked up from his newspaper with a smile that made him handsome.

"Why, Frank, old man!" he said, who ever expected to see you?"

The two men shook hands warmly. They were great friends; they were bound by various sympathies and ties.

"When did you come?" asked Alan Lester, as Major Doyme went up to Lady Lester's Bath-chair. "They didn't expect you at Kingsford yesterday?"

"No, and they don't expect me there still," answered Major Doyme. "I came straight here—I have travelled all night, and got to your station half-an-hour ago—I thought I would look you up first, Alan."

"Delighted to see you; but come along into the house, my mother will excuse you, I know; you must want something to eat, and something to drink."

Major Doyme smiled feebly. Somehow the sight of Alan's pleasant face had made him feel unutterably sad. "Good heavens," was he about to stammer this dear fellow, thought the smart little soldier, with a misty feeling in his bright blue eyes. He pulled his tawny moustache; he looked so agitated that Alan saw something was wrong.

"Come along, old fellow," he said, putting his arm through Major Doyme's. And as the two turned and went away together, in his frank manner, Alan Lester asked at once if anything were the matter.

"What is it, Frank?" he said. "Is anything up?"

"I have come on a most extraordinary business, Alan," answered Major Doyme. "The strangest thing has happened—I want you to tell me if you can remember about the death of your eldest brother?"

"About poor Jack's death? I was a little boy then, you know, but I remember him—it was the saddest thing—he had got into some trouble about money, and about a woman, and he threw himself into the sea; somewhere near Brighton."

"And he wrote to your father to tell him he was about to do this?"

"Yes; it was dreadful, wasn't it? He was a fine fellow—a fine, handsome young man—my mother was very fond of him, and I remember the distress in the house at the time."

"Yet, Alan—would you believe it—a man dropped dead yesterday in Gortmouth barracks-yard, who claims to be your brother, John Lester. He left a letter addressed to his commanding officer at the time of his death—I am in command there now—and—and—I broke the seal of this letter, and it contains the whole story of your brother's supposed suicide."

"And you mean to say," said Alan Lester, looking in the greatest astonishment at Major Doyme's face, "that John Lester, my

brother, did not die three-and-twenty years ago?"

"The man who died yesterday says not. But read the letter—and you can judge."

They went into the house together, and into the library, and then Alan sat down and read the dead soldier's letter, while Frank Doyme stared absently out of the window, with some very miserable feeling in his heart. He did not like to glance round, to watch Alan's changing looks. They were both silent; the clock on the mantel-piece kept ticking on—was Alan never going to speak, thought Doyme, with almost impatience. At last he could bear it no longer; he looked around and he saw Alan's face.

It was very white: the letter lay on the table; Alan had laid it down, and as Frank Doyme turned round, he asked steadily, though in a changed voice:—

"And where is the ebony box, with his watch and seal?"

"Tis here," answered Doyme, producing a small parcel from his coat pocket. "It was found among his effects, but I did not open it; the key is here, to." And Doyme put the parcel into Alan Lester's cold hand.

He (Alan Lester) then unlocked the ebony box, and one after the other drew out its contents. A handsome gold hunting watch, with the crest engraved on both sides of the gold case; a heavy gold seal, with armorial bearings cut on blood-stone; and a letter, the ink faded, the paper frayed with time.

Alan looked at each separately as he took them out, and then after a moment's hesitation read the letter and silently handed it to Doyme.

Major Doyme in his turn read it—an angry, bitter letter from a proud father to a son whom he considered had disgraced himself—the words that had stabbed John Lester most deeply about his young brother were there. "My other son, your half-brother, must be now as a stranger to you; I cannot have him contaminated by your base example."

Major Doyme read this, and then looked at that "other son" and saw that Alan had covered his face with his hands. An overpowering sensation of pity and remorse rushed into Doyme's heart as he glanced at his friend, and the next moment he laid his hand on Alan's shoulder.

"Alan," he said, "no one knows this—no one but you and I, if this man were your brother; for years he voluntarily gave up his birth-right, and now that he is dead has he any right to claim it? If you wish it this never need be known."

"I don't quite understand you, Frank," he said, "of course whatever happens we must both act as men of honor—if John, my eldest brother, married and had a son, that son is undoubtedly the owner of Roden."

"But think what he may be, a low young fellow reared in a tavern!"

"That does not touch the question—the one thing that could touch it—was this marriage absolutely a legal one?"

"Very likely not," said Major Doyme, with renewed hope; "you are a fine fellow, Alan—I would rather be shot than see your place taken away from you!"

"This letter leaves us no choice, Frank," said Alan Lester, now rising and laying his hand on the open letter lying on the table; "however bitter it is, we must both do our duty. Our plain duty is to see this woman and her son—to learn the whole story. I believe this letter has been written by my brother John, and no other—who else could know all the circumstance? I have heard my mother a hundred times talk about this woman he mentions—Laura Lovat—she married after poor John's supposed death; and look at the watch, the seal, and my father's letter—and this is my father's handwriting, for I know it well."

"Still someone might have got hold of these things—"

"How could anyone—unless John was murdered? But there is one test; my mother has in her possession the last letter my father received from him before his supposed suicide—if the handwriting is the same—"

"That would almost decide whether this man was really your brother John—can you get this letter?"

"By asking my mother for it—but I don't want to frighten her—till this is a certainty I would spare her."

"Of course—still it would settle the question whether this letter were written by your brother or not—could you make some excuse? Tell her I want to hear the whole story of your brother's death?"

"I could say that," said Alan Lester, slowly; "stay here, I will see if I can get it."

He went out of the room as he spoke, and was away nearly half-an-hour. It was not a pleasant half-hour for Frank Doyme, and his heart beat very fast when he heard Alan's returning footsteps. Then Alan, grave and pale, entered the room, carrying in his hand an open letter, and almost without a word he laid it down on the table side-by-side with the dead soldier's.

They both looked at the two letters, and then at each other. There was no longer any doubt. The soldier who had died yesterday in the hospital at Gortmouth, was the same man who, twenty-three years ago had penned the sad despairing words of farewell to his stern father. The hand writing was the same, the signature the same—the same hand had written both.

"This settles the question of his identity," said Alan Lester, in a low pained voice.

"Yes, I fear so," answered Doyme; indeed, what else could he say?

"And now we must learn if the marriage is really a binding one—but no doubt it is—my brother would tell me so."

"And—and—what will you do?"

"There is but one thing to do, Frank—it is a bitter blow—I am thinking of my mother and Annette."

His voice grew husky as he uttered the name of Annette Doyme. For years he had dearly loved this girl, though he had never spoken of it for his mother's sake. He had fancied she would not care to have another Lady Lester at Roden, or a rival in his love. So he had resolutely steered his heart against Annette's attractions, and it was Lady Lester herself who had first mentioned the subject of his marriage. One day Annette had called at Roden, and after she was gone Lady Lester called her son to her side, and kissed his cheek.

"I think I have found out where my boy's heart is," she said, tenderly.

"His heart is with his mother," he answered, with a blush and a smile.

"No, my dear," said Lady Lester; "you like Annette Doyme, do you not? And why don't you ask her to be your wife, Alan? I think I know this too—you fancy I would not like it? Indeed I would, my dear—I want to see you happy—to have your children clambering by my knee."

It was soon settled after this, and Lady Lester's heart alone knew the sacrifice she had made of her own feelings, for the sake of her dear son. She liked Annette Doyme, but she disliked her mother, and her keen and sensitive nerves had been constantly grated of late by being thrown in contact with a coarse-minded and worldly woman.

But she knew that Alan's heart was set on Annette, and she made no sign of her disapproval of her future daughter-in-law's family. And Alan Lester did love Annette with an extravagant love. As he mentioned her name to her brother—how this terrible change in his position might affect her—the crowd of emotions that swept through the man's heart completely overpowered him.

"Annette would be no true woman," broke in Major Doyme, hotly, as Alan's voice faltered him, "if this can change her."

Alan made no answer; he rose and went to the window, and stood there silently for a few moments. Then, still with that painful change in his voice, he said quietly:

"Would you mind going to talk to my mother, Frank for a little while? They will fancy something is the matter if we shut ourselves up any longer here—and I think that you and I had better start for Plymouth this afternoon—it is no good delaying it. Say nothing to my mother, I will join you in a few minutes."

He turned and went out of the room as he spoke, and Major Doyme understood that he wished to be alone. He went straight to his own bedroom and opened the window hastily when he got there, with a strange sense of suffocation and a sharp bodily pain in his heart.

It had come so suddenly, so suddenly! As far as he could see from his window lay the fair heritage which an hour ago he had so securely believed to be his own. And Annette—she rose before his memory as he had first seen her three years ago—a girl in a white gown, playing battledore and shuttlecock under the shadow of the trees. Her sweet face, her sunny smiles, would they too fade away, and leave his life doubly desolate? Alan shivered with a chill sense of doubt and dread. The pre-shadow of coming ill fell as ice upon his soul.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)