

[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 XLIII.—NOT IN LOVE.

The two men went back to Lady Lester after this conversation, both grave and sombre, but Godfrey Harford sat down by his old friend, and talked to her and tried to amuse her as best he could.

Alan, however, was restless, so restless that his mother noticed it, and her fond eyes followed him as he kept walking about the room, evidently thinking of something that had greatly disturbed him.

And after Godfrey Harford had ridden away in the gleaming moonlight with a sad and troubled heart, he left Alan in a state of no ordinary perplexity.

It would have required a colder nature than his not to have been deeply moved by the confession he had just listened to. When trouble had come to him, when Annette had forsaken him, this sweet child had learned to love him. And she had told this to Harford—to a man whom Alan very well knew the whole neighborhood would have considered a very great match for her, for the Squire of Kimsel was exceedingly rich, and not only rich, but genial and well-born, and had always taken a leading position in the country as his father and grandfather had done before him.

And that Lily should refuse such a man for the sake of a romantic attachment to himself not unnaturally stirred some very tender feelings in Alan's heart.

"Poor little girl, dear little girl," he thought, recalling Lily's fair face, and sweet, serious eyes. Often lately he had thought how pretty she had grown, and he seemed to see her now—after a Squire was gone—standing in the sunlight bare-headed, by the stream, or under the flickering shadow of the great oak, weaving the ivy-garland by his side.

And what should he do? This conversation with Harford had placed him in a strange and embarrassing position. He knew very well he was not in love with Lily. He had tried too deeply of that sweet, dangerous draught, not to know that this child's touch would never thrill through his whole being as Annette's had done. The glamour of passion, the deep, strong feeling that had made life for him at one time unutterably joyous and happy, and at another time a burden almost too heavy to be borne, would not be known, or again from the dead ashes of his lost love.

But that love was gone and gone, as Doyle himself had told him, and Alan smiled bitterly at the thought. Annette's best hope of happiness now was to learn to care for her husband, and his—Alan's—best hope was to learn to forget her.

And could he forget her? Alan asked himself this question again and again, walking there up and down on the terrace in the moonlight, long after Godfrey Harford had left. The sweetness, the glamour of his love was all over, but was the love dead? He scarcely could answer the question. To think of Annette now was always painful. She was another man's wife, and they were parted by a band he would never seek to break. And he was free—free to love again if he could love, and this sweet child had his love to him.

He was greatly touched, too, by Godfrey Harford's generosity. He knew what it was for this man to come to him and say, "Do not love her," and he knew, too, that Godfrey Harford must love Lily. He had himself, to have been asked to do this. He had said, "No; for the happiness of the child, I had called her, and I had loved and appreciated her, and I had judged that the Squire had

judging, for when he returned from his afternoon ride he found Lily in the drawing-room at Roden talking to his mother.

He wondered if the lovely blush which stole to her face as he entered were any sign of love. He himself felt slightly discomposed, for the first time, in Lily's presence. He had always thought of her before almost as a little girl—as Annette's young sister—now she seemed different to him. She was a woman, with the hopes and feelings of a woman, and Alan noticed that her face and form were alike matured. She had gained a new and subtle charm. "All love is sweet, given or returned," and Lily's shy loveliness had gained beauty in Alan's eyes.

She had brought Lady Lester some of the ivy garlands which Alan had admired and asked for, and in her pretty manner she told him she had walked yesterday all the way to Burnly to get the ivy.

The great oak under which she, Alan, and Frank had laughed on the last day they were out fishing together, stood on the outskirts of Burnly Wood, but Lily did not tell Alan she had gone under the oak yesterday to dream there sweet dreams of him. Of course she did not tell him this, yet Alan remembered the sweet, glad look in her eyes as she sat by his side, with the sunbeams glistening through the rustling foliage above her head.

"We spent a very pleasant day there, Lily, did we not?"

He said this a little curiously, and for a moment she lifted her large grey eyes full of their new softness to his face.

"Yes it was a lovely day."

Very common-place words, yet there was a tender ring in her tone, a sweetness, a fulness, that caught Lady Lester's ear, and she looked at Lily, wondering what made the girl so fair.

And for the first time it struck her, it dawned upon her mind, that Lily might love Alan! Could it be possible—this little girl? And yet Lily was no longer a little girl. There was a grace, a womanliness about her now which Lady Lester had never before noticed. And then she looked at Alan, who was standing watching Lily's face!

"And do you like fishing, Miss Lily?" she asked, with her kind smile.

"I like fishing, but I don't like to catch fish," answered Lily, also smiling, "I like to sit on the banks, and watch the water."

"Yet Lily has a gorgeous new fishing-rod, mother, given to her by a great friend of yours, too?"

"And who may my great friend be, Alan?"

"He means Mr. Harford, Lady Lester. Mr. Harford gave me the rod because he gave all the children one at the Rectory—and I was there."

"Mr. Harford is a very kind man—he dined here yesterday—I did not think he looked as well as usual, did you, Alan?"

"Perhaps not—he's a very fine fellow, Harford. Don't you like him, Lily?"

"Yes, very much indeed."

"I think most people like him," said Lady Lester.

"And I like Lady Elizabeth so much," continued Lily.

"Lady Elizabeth has a very sweet, sympathetic nature, and therefore a very charming manner. She seems to know how to please everyone she meets."

"I would not care to please everyone I meet," said Alan.

"That is because my son is too proud," smiled Lady Lester with a fond, tender look.

"That is true, mother, I dare say, but I think Lady Elizabeth has a little bit of pride too, only she's too clever to show it."

Presently Lily rose and said she must go, but Alan did not take the little timid hand she offered him.

"I will see you safely out of the house," he said pleasantly.

"Goodbye, my dear," said Lady Lester,

"I shall be pleased to see you again." And then, as Lily and Alan disappeared, she looked wistfully after them, wondering if, in truth, there was any love between their hearts.

As they crossed the hall, Alan took a hat from the stand, and after a moment's hesitation, asked Lily if he might escort her through the park; and he watched the glad, bright look in the girl's face as she answered:

"Thank you very much."

It had been a rare English day, when the sky is one unbroken blue, and the sun, shining still with undiminished splendour, was now sinking in the west. And the wide, undulating park, the plantations, the gravelly fields beyond, were all bathed in this glorious yellow light.

"One ought to be in a good humour such a day as this," said Alan, looking at the rich landscape.

"And happy, too."

"Happiness, my dear Lily, is perhaps too much to expect."

"Oh! I don't think that, such little things make one happy."

"Yes, when one is happy, but neither little things nor big things can make a heavy heart light."

Lily was silent, she was wondering if Alan still had a heavy heart.

"When you come to us old like me," said Alan smiling, and looking at the girl's thoughtful face—

"Well, what then?"

"You will know that happiness—I mean the feeling that makes all life truly enjoyable, is too fragile a thing to exist long amid the troubles of the world. But there is a sort of hazy happiness we call contentment, that I think perhaps we may hope for."

"I would not be satisfied with contentment."

"It's better than misery, Lily, and to be very happy we risk too much."

"Then you think no one is quite happy?"

"I think two people could be for a little while."

"And—once changes?"

"Most probably. No, Lily, bold fast to contentment—it's your safest investment!"

Alan spoke half in jest, half in earnest, looking all the while at the sweet, up-reared face by his side. "How pretty she is," he was thinking, and presently, when they reached the part of the park where the finest trees grow, and which here formed a long beautiful green arcade, Alan stopped for a moment to admire the glistening sunbeams dappling the green turf.

"There is always something for us to admire at least," he said, "the world is full of beauty—and of pain!"

"Why do you talk so sadly? You did not talk like this at Burnly that day."

"Frank was there, and there is something essentially scurrilous about Frank, do you know? And sense, like other things, is infectious. I am talking folly to-day."

"Oh, Sir Alan, I hope you have not caught that from me!" said Lily, with a merry laugh.

"Perhaps I have," he answered with affected gravity, "you have more imagination than Frank. He is all downright stern common-sense. Do you know Wordsworth, Lily? Frank sometimes reminds me of the yellow pines on the moor—a primrose by the river's bank, a primrose and nothing more."

"The soft blue sky above me
Is his heart; he never falls
The witchery of the sky, blue sky?"

There! now I am afraid you do feel the witchery of the soft blue sky, Miss Lily, and it's a very dangerous element in any one's composition."

"But why, Sir Alan?"

"Because our friend Frank carries the same uncompromising prosaicism into the affairs of life, as well as the affairs of nature. He has no dreamy romantic notions or speculations about anything. His logic that hard common-sense of his pounding down upon our little weak points without mercy; therefore I am always very scurrilous in Frank's company. By-the-by, I suppose—"

"Why do you stop?"

"I was just going to say I suppose it wouldn't do for you and me to go fishing without Frank?"

"Unless—my father—"

"To be sure! I never thought of the Colonel—well, Lily, would you like to go fishing again, and have lunch again under the big oak?"

"Yes, very much indeed."

"Then, if you will allow me, I will walk

on with you to the Grange, and see what day will suit Colonel Doyle. Perhaps tomorrow; we won't have two crushing days together most likely."

So Lily and Alan Lester did walk on together to the Grange, and were received there very graciously by Mrs. Doyle.

"I have come to ask if the Colonel will go fishing in the Burnly stream," said Alan, by way of apologizing for, or rather of explaining his appearance.

"I should think it will give him great pleasure to do so, Sir Alan. But he's in the house—Lily, my dear, call your father."

The Colonel was delighted to accept Alan's invitation, and looked with a pleased countenance at his little girl.

"Will tomorrow do, if it is not too sunny?" asked Alan.

Thus they settled it, and after Alan was gone, and dinner was over, while Lily was wandering bare-headed in the back garden, watching the mist rise, and darkness fall over the woods of Roden, Mrs. Doyle drew her chair a little nearer her husband's.

"I want a little serious conversation with you, Richard," she said.

"Fire away, my dear; I'm ready to listen. I hope it's nothing disagreeable, though."

"It was rather a marked thing, Sir Alan coming here to-day with Lily, wasn't it?"

"Do you mean it looked as if he were paying her attention?"

"Something very like it, and she has always been such a great friend of his. It would be the very best thing that could happen, if we could arrange it."

"You leave it alone, my dear, that's my advice—of course it would be a splendid thing for the child—but I don't think he'll ever get over the affliction about Annette, for Richard isn't his equal for pride."

"That's all past now, and Lily's very pretty, far prettier than Annette is now, poor thing, and I certainly think Sir Alan admires Lily. You see she saw a great deal of him when Frank was here, and I fancy, though Frank's so clever, and he offended me so about Annette that I did not care to talk confidentially to him about the girl—but still I fancy Frank had some sort of idea of this from something he said to me."

"I thought you thought Harford was running after her?"

"And so he did; he was quite in love with her I am sure, but then you see there's Lady Elizabeth in the way! And Mrs. Doyle shrugged her substantial shoulders.

"Yet she came here to call with him."

"Oh yes, she never likes to let him out of her sight, that's the truth; and I am certain, quite as certain as if I heard her say the words, that she persuaded Mr. Harford to go abroad just to keep him out of Lily's way."

"You think she doesn't want him to marry, then?"

"I am sure she doesn't. She wants to keep him dangling after herself, and most likely leave his money to her children. Oh! yes, I see through it all very well. I'm told he sent her a diamond ornament worth thousands, when the Rectory came back without him. Yes, my Lady Elizabeth knows what she's about."

"Then you think Harford has quite cried off, I'm sure when we were at Kimsel I thought he meant to offer to Lily."

"So I'm no doubt he did, but Lady Elizabeth has great influence with him, the greatest influence I am told, and I expect she made some objections to Lily, and got him to go away."

"What objections could she make to the child? She is far too good for an old fellow like Harford!"

"My dear you know how women get round men, and she's constant opportunities, of course, of saying any little spiteful things she chooses to Mr. Harford, for he is always at the Rectory they tell me. But however, this is not to the point. What I wanted to say is, Richard, that I think for Lily's sake, we should give a dinner party and invite Lady Elizabeth and Mr. Claxton and the Squire and Sir Alan, of course; it might bring things to the point."

"It would cost a deuced deal of money," grumbled the Colonel, who was of "frugal mind."

"It will cost money, certainly; everything does cost money. But then you must entertain to keep up one's position, and it might influence Sir Alan to see that Lady Elizabeth came to dine here."

"But would she come? That's the question!"