

## Sybil's Elopement.

BY K. T.

## CHAPTER I.

"I thought I heard you talking with somebody, Sybil!"

"You did, Leo."

"Who was with you?"

"Roderick Kemp."

"The new gamekeeper? What do you think of him?"

Sybil's dark eyes sparkled, and her cheeks grew bright as the knot of crimson roses in her hand.

"I admire him more than any man I have ever seen," she answered with enthusiasm; "he has the bearing of a prince, in spite of the position he holds, and I believe one day we shall find he has deceived us. His manners are too courtly for a keeper's lodge."

Leonard Cardon looked with surprised annoyance at his sister.

"I hope you are not going to encourage any romantic nonsense of that sort," he said contemptuously; "as for the fellow, it won't be well for him if I find him sneaking about where you are. What was he doing in this part of the grounds? He doesn't expect to find game in the roses, I suppose?"

"He brought me this little squirrel," she answered, smiling tenderly as she moved her arm and showed a soft gold-brown ball nestled against her; "it is quite tame, Leo. He found it in the woods this morning."

Leo put out his hand and took the squirrel.

"Here!" he called to a gardener who was working at a vine; "take this to Kemp, and tell him to put it back where he found it."

The man obeyed before Sybil could interfere, and she turned to Leo with passionate anger.

"How dared you treat me like that?" she exclaimed, her sweet red lips quivering. "I will never forgive you—never, as long as I live!"

She turned away, but not before he had seen the hot tears gathering in her eyes. He took a quick forward step, and caught her arm impulsively.

"Mind, no hero-making of Roderick Kemp," he exclaimed, his boyish face sterner than it had been before; "if he is fool enough to forget his position, remember yours. If I find you together again, he shall go!"

Sybil flashed a defiant look at him.

"If you sent him away, I would go with him. I tell you he is better than any of the men who visit us, and nothing will alter my opinion. His voice in itself is enough to prove his breeding. I wonder you have not found it out before."

A scornful gleam came into Leo's eyes, and his grasp tightened on her arm.

"Are you mad, Sybil?" he muttered fiercely.

"No; only I will not have you say horrid things of anyone who has tried to please me, and whom I feel to be my equal, and yours, Leo. You had no right to do as you did with the squirrel."

"I will allow you to accept nothing at his hands! I am surprised, Sybil, that you should not know yourself better. Come indoors with me."

"I shall not! You are in the wrong—not I. Why should I submit to your rudeness? I hate you for what you have said to me!"

Her words seem to pain him—to shock him. An expression of hurt pride crossed his features, and letting his hand drop from her arm, he went into the house alone.

He had scarcely disappeared when a dark handsome face peered through the thick rose-leaves, and Roderick Kemp was by Sybil's side.

"I could not help hearing part of what passed between you and your brother," he muttered, his voice scarcely rising above his breath, though it fell with a singular persuasiveness on the girl's ears. "I regret having caused the quarrel. How could I know I should offend by offering you what was your own?"

Sybil looked at him, the resentful light still in her eyes as she thought of Leo's injustice.

"It was most unkind of him," she said, slowly pulling to pieces the roses she had gathered. "I wanted the squirrel!"

The gamekeeper smiled.

"Somebody else will give you one that will be more dearly prized."

"I will not have any other!" she replied petulantly. "I cared for it more because you gave it me."

A dusky wave swept to his brow, and his eyes gleamed as he watched her—the beautiful, wayward spoiled child, who had treasured his gift for the sake of the giver—the giver only her father's gamekeeper!

"Don't speak to me like this for pity's sake!" he exclaimed, a passionate light on his face. "You make me forget myself—would that you had been born a beggar, and I a king!"

The words rang with emotion—half bitter, half tender, and he put his hand across his eyes, and turned unsteadily away.

Her clear soft voice arrested him.

"Why—why do you wish for wealth? Do you think it makes happiness? It gives me nothing but solitude and disappointment. I wish with you that I were poor. I could do what I liked then."

"You do not know the bitterness of poverty!" he said regretfully. "If Sir Rosslyn Arden were in my place, would your parents care to see you betrothed to him? If I had come here, master of a great fortune, should I be treated as I am now? It is the money, not the man that is considered!"

"Have I shown this difference to you?" she asked, lifting her large misty eyes to his restless face.

"It would have been better, perhaps, if you had! You have made me dissatisfied—wretched. I must go where I shall never see you. All this madness!"

"All what, Roderick?"

"Don't ask me!" he exclaimed. "I must never see you again!"

"Never, Roderick! Why must you leave me?"

"Because you have made me so far forget my position—that I love you! I am mad to tell you; but you have wronged me. I love you—I love you!"

"If I were poor, would you ask me to be your wife?" she said, laying a trembling hand on his velvet sleeve.

"I would move heaven and earth to win you. Now, I dare not think—I dare not hope: I can only leave you!"

She raised a pale eager face to his, and her heart throbbled wildly under the roses nestling in the folds of her dress.

"Roderick, I would sooner give up wealth for love than sacrifice love to fortune. Our souls are on one level, why should the world put us apart! I am miserable in this great grand home where no one cares for me. Oh, Roderick," she broke off, with despairing tenderness, "cannot you see I love you—that my heart will break if you leave me?"

"Hush! you are tempting me—you are making me forget! Let me go while I have reason enough to know this madness!"

Sybil drew near, and clasped her other hand on his arm.

"If I am ready to give up all for you, Roderick, will you take me?"

He looked earnestly at her, ambition and passionate daring struggling in his breast.

Why should he let this chance slip by? She was ready to give herself to him, to share her fortune with him, or to relinquish it.

Supposing her parents refused their consent to such a marriage, they would have no power to withhold her money when once she was of age, and if Sybil could make up her mind to elope with him, there would be no fear for the future.

"Do you love me well enough to trust yourself to me?" he asked softly. "There is nothing I would not do to make up for the sacrifice. I would treasure you so tenderly, my little fair bird, you should never regret having put your faith in me. I may not always be as I am now; one day you might find you have not married the beggar you have thought me."

"I do not mind," she said, letting her head droop shyly against his shoulder; "rich or poor, you will always be the same to me—my hero—my idol!"

The sounds of footsteps on the gravel path startled them. Roderick drew guiltily from Sybil, and hurried silently away.

It was Leo.

"With that man again!" he exclaimed fiercely; "if my father doesn't get rid of him, I shall do the follow harm!"

"What harm?"

"Take care, Sybil, or I will shoot him down like a dog—I will, as surely as I hold this gun in my hand!"

"If you killed him, you would kill me, for he is more to me than my own life."

"This from you, who are all but engaged to Rosslyn! You seem to be losing yourself strangely."

"I never told Sir Rosslyn I would marry him."

"It was an understood thing."

"If people make up those kind of things in their minds, they must expect to be disappointed. Roderick is a true gentleman—a man of honour, and I have said I will be his wife."

"And I say you shall never be his wife!" Leo exclaimed, white with rage. "You are my sister—you bear my name! Rather than you should sink down to that cur's level I would kill you both."

Sybil pressed her lips fearlessly together.

"I am not afraid," she said defiantly; "I shall act for myself, and bear the consequences."

"It will be at your peril!"

"Perhaps not. You may own yourself in fault even yet."

Leaving him, she went straight to her father, and begged him to give his consent to her marriage with Roderick Kemp.

"I love him, and he is so true and noble," she pleaded. "He wanted to go away and never see me again; but if I lost him I should die!"

Sir Maurice Cardon looked at her in speechless surprise—looked at the beautiful wilful face that to him had seemed only lovely with a child's innocent brightness.

"What nonsense is this?" he asked with contracted lips. "How dare you come to me with such a jest?"

She met his angry gaze unflinchingly.

"It is no jest," she cried proudly. "I love him, and I have promised to marry him!"

"What is your promise?" he exclaimed, his eyes hardening as he watched her.

"A word which, rather than break, I would wrench myself free of every other tie! No one loves me as he does—no one has so great a claim to my obedience. No matter what I have to fight against, while he is true to me, I will follow him, till death parts us!"

Sir Maurice raised his hand as though to strike her. Their eyes met, and with an effort he recovered his chill calmness of manner—the calm which alone could strengthen his authority.

"Go to your room, Sybil. I forbid any intercourse to pass between you and Roderick Kemp. Disobey my word, and this roof shall no longer be your home—my door shall be closed against you."

"But, papa—"

He waved his hand imperatively.

"I have heard enough! Go, and remember what I have told you!"

She looked at him with her clear dark eyes full of intense feeling.

"If Roderick waited for two or three years, and became rich in that time, would you give your consent then?"

"Under no circumstances would I allow you to marry Roderick Kemp."

"Will you never—never change your mind? Are you sure you will never say I may be his wife?"

"I have already answered you. Go to your room, and let me hear no more of this. As for this insolent villain, he shall be clear out of Forest Court before the night is over!"

With a strange tumult burning in her heart, Sybil turned slowly away. She went almost mechanically up the broad staircase to her own room, and throwing herself on her knees near the window, hid her face in her hands and let the tears flow hot and fast.

"Oh, Roderick—Roderick!" she thought bitterly. "why did you ever come—why did I ever see you? It would be easier now to leave all the world than to give you up!"

She had no one to turn to in this time of sore trial. Everybody was against her and against Roderick. She had only the choice to wrench her heart away from his, or to follow him, and be as one dead to her home.

A wild despair took possession of her as she recalled her father's last words to her.

Roderick was to be driven away, treated worse than a thief; and she would never see him again.

It could not be; they could not be so cruel. If Roderick would have faith in her and wait perhaps everything would end happily.

Hours afterwards, when cramped and wretched, she still crouched there, a letter, thrown on to the window-sill from the garden beneath startled her reflections.

Instinctively she knew it was a message from Roderick.

Snatching it from the ledge, she tore open the envelope, and with feverish interest read the words:

"I have received my dismissal. Must I go alone, or will you trust all to me? You could escape easily with me. If you have courage to take the step, you need not fear that your parents will long withhold their forgiveness."

A few passionate sentences assuring her of his undying devotion were added to these, and poor Sybil, her heart aching with wounded love, tremblingly wrote a reply:

"This parting will kill me, Roderick! Come what may, I must be true to you. I am wretched; I can see no way out of this sorrow but by trusting to your guidance."

She wrapped the scrap of paper round the stone that had guided Roderick's message to her, and dropped it gently down.

It fell at his feet, and as he read the answer, a dark triumph came over his face. "They shall see who is master," he thought grimly. "They will live to regret their pride!"

Another letter was thrown to Sybil, more urgent and impassioned than the first, entreating her to be ready to fly with him at mid-night.

She was to draw back the curtains and open her window when everybody else was in bed, and, at a sign from him, was to climb on the balcony, and leap down into his arms, taking with her all the money and jewels she had in her possession.

Sybil scarcely knew whether she rejoiced or grieved most over the thought of the step she was about to take.

She did not go down again till dinner was announced. She had been putting together the few things she wanted to take with her, and when she took her place at the table, her eyes were full of yearning tears.

Roderick's name was not mentioned. She knew by the stern anger on her father's face, and Leo's vindictive glance, that there had been a scene, and she flushed guiltily as she remembered how her lover was to have been far away before the night approached.

Did they believe he had already left Forest Court?

A dull silence was maintained throughout the meal. Sybil touched nothing; there was a stifling sensation in her breast and she looked from one cold face to another, her eyes and lips quivered pitifully.

She longed to plead again for Roderick's sake, but something in her heart seemed

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