

# STRANGELY WEDDED.

A Thrilling Story of Romance and Adventure.

## CHAPTER V.—NEW QUARTERS.

"Time is a file that wears and makes no noise."

Four years had gone by. Jack Trevor had long ago become an established favourite in the Fighting Fifteenth, was keen on soldiering, gay as a boy, blessed with a delightful fund of good humour, though, on occasion, he could and sometimes did blaze up in a very pretty show of fiery wrath.

The Fifteenth were quartered at Chertsey Camp. Not a particularly lively spot nor one in which a soldier is ever very well pleased to find himself. However, in a soldier's life, peace is altogether a question of chance, and on the whole the Fifteenth had not been very hardily used.

From Brighton they had gone to Leeds and from Leeds to Norwich—where they were utterly spoilt—and now they were in camp at Chertsey for two years, with the pleasant prospect of a long spell in Ireland when they should find themselves on the move again.

However, after the manner of soldiers, as they had nearly two years in front of them which must perforce be spent in Chertsey, the regiment on the whole settled itself down and made the best of the present without more ado than a few groans at the mention of the future. The mess-hut had been smartened as much as possible and all the windows were gay with bright flowers. The little enclosure in which the long hut stood had been planted thickly with tall moon-daisies, red geraniums and yellow calceolarias, while odd corners were filled up with brave attempts at rockeries in the crevices of which little hardy ferns were flourishing as cheerfully as if they were growing on a wild west country cliff instead of an arid and dusty camp.

"Well, well, they were conscientiously watered twice and even thrice a day. Perhaps the little ferns knew no better; let us hope not. Anyway, certain it is that the enclosure around the mess-hut at Chertsey was ablaze with bright-hued flowers to gather which was to incur the severest penalty of the law, something very dreadful, I know—not quite what, though I fancy it stopped—but little short of death itself.

Nor was the mess-hut the only gay spot in the camp; every hut almost had its patch of turf, sometimes scarcely more than an apology for the genuine thing, yet in most cases fostered by every artificial means within reach of camp-life, every window had its little garden, and within the huts now that the first bustle of removal was over everyone was busy making the best of the situation.

In those of the married officers, the wives were most of them very busy—and let me tell you that there is nothing at which a really smart army woman will stop when she is doing up her quarters. There was much puzzling over a certain column in the *Queen*, wherein a sister in arms for a long time was wont to discourse learnedly out of her own experience on cosy corners, upholstery, painting, papering and the like. Some busy with needle and thread, others with hammer and nails, or paint and brush, and in one of the unmarried officer's huts or I should, to be quite correct, say outside it, our friend Jack Trevor with about a half-dozen pots of enamel was excessively busy converting an exceedingly shabby collection of chairs and tables into what would be described in the trade as "a suite for a boudoir in ivory-white."

Jack himself was very hot and very much bedaubed with paint and he had also got an ingenious way of putting it on which, though entirely satisfactory as to the result, involved a great deal more trouble in the actual process. This consisted of putting it on hot—and let me tell you that to re-enamel any article of furniture out in the open air and keep the pot of enamel hot the while, is anything but an easy business.

"Hi, Todd—Todd," Jack called out, having discovered that his paint was beginning to show signs of the brush—"Todd, I say, I must have some more hot water."

"Well, 'pon my soul," said a voice behind him, "I don't know much about painting chairs and tables, but I never knew you did 'em with hot water before."

"Ah, is that you, Monty. Come in, old chap," Jack answered. "Come in—I'm very busy."

"So I see," said the new-comer, pushing the little gate open and strolling leisurely into the tiny enclosure. Are you too busy to come down to the town with me?"

"Monty—Monty—stop—don't sit on that chair—it's wet," Jack yelled—then at the sight of the jump which Monty Carlton gave, he went off into a gay peal of laughter.

"Monty—Monty—is there another man in the world but yourself who would go near white paint in his best uniform?"

"Then why the devil," asked Carlton with imperturbable placidity, "do you spread paint about just where a fellow is likely to go? By the by, old chap, are you thinking of getting married?"

"Married! No—why?"

"This bridal-like display," with a gesture which included the old chairs and tables. "Oh, they're not mine—they're Mr. Stratton's, poor little thing. She can't manage them herself and Stratton won't try. I say, Todd, Todd."

"Yes, Sir," said Todd, putting his head out of the door.

"More hot water," said Jack—"and bring Mr. Carlton a chair out—the big one."

"Yes, Sir," said Todd disappearing again.

"I'll tell you what it is, my friend," remarked Carlton when he had got the chair and had comfortably settled himself therein—"you'll have to look out."

"Why?" Jack asked, as he diligently stirred the pot of paint with a bit of stick.

"Why? It's clear enough—pretty woman—indifferent husband—no money—friendly subaltern—old chairs and tables—new coat of paint—I say look out."

"What an ass you are, Monty," said Jack beginning to ply his brush again.

"Perhaps. Keep it in mind all the same," answered Monty with absolute good-nature.

"What that you're an ass, old chap? Oh! I needn't trouble to do that—you'll not let me forget it," with a gay laugh.

Monty laughed too. "Yes, I know all that. It's a chestnut but no matter. Just mind what I say, that's all."

"All right, old chap, I will. All the same up to the present moment there's been no need of it. I'm sorry for the little roman, for she's had hard lines all the time; but she's a good little woman and a loyal

little woman too and I should as soon think of cutting my throat right away as of trying to presume on my acquaintance or get the least little bit more familiar than she chooses me to be."

"Yes, I know," said Carlton, taking his cigarette out of his mouth—"but I've noticed several times before that very pretty scandals have arisen out of the mildest and most platonic intercourse with just that type of mild and good little down-trodden woman. However, it's no business of mine—only I've had it on my mind to give you a hint for some time, and now I've done it off my mind and we needn't say any more about it."

It was perhaps the longest speech that Jack had ever heard from Carlton—who was a man of remarkably few words. He laughed a little at the lecture and put out a rather paint-daubed hand to his comrade. "Old chap," he said, "it's awfully good of you to tell me if you see anything which makes you think I'm going into danger; but I assure you in this case, there is no danger. I like Mrs. Stratton immensely—immensely, she's one of the best little women I ever knew, but I'm not even a little bit in love with her, and if I were it wouldn't be any good for she simply adores Stratton—worships the very ground he walks on."

"Good God!" ejaculated Carlton piously. "Yes, I know—but it's true all the same. And Stratton don't care a brass button for her, not a brass button."

"H'm!" murmured Carlton thoughtfully—then after a moment's silence, he continued in a different tone—"By the by, you've heard of course, that Lawrence has arranged his exchange?"

"The Major? No—I never believed he meant it. Who is it with?"

"A Major Dennis of the 24th Lancers."

"Ah!—Do you know anything about him?"

"Not a thing."

"What does the Colonel say?"

"Very little, for he knows very little; he's never met him. But he said just now 'I've heard of him as a very smart soldier, so I suppose it's all right.'"

"Ah!" and Jack went on with his painting and finished off the leg of a chair which he then very carefully set aside to dry. "I wonder who he belongs to and where he comes from?"

"Something to do with—with—oh! I forget," answered Carlton carelessly.

He sat watching Jack till he had finished the last article of furniture—"You've done now, haven't you?" he asked sitting up with some show of eagerness.

"Only the first coat," answered Jack.

"What! Are you going to do 'em all over again?"

"Why, yes, of course, I am," Jack replied, "did you ever see a table with one coat of paint that looked decent?"

"How should I know? A table might have a hundred and fifty coats of paint on it before I should be any wiser; but look here, old chap, can't you drop it now and come out with me? They can't be dry enough to go over again yet."

"What, as I am?" asked Jack with much gravity.

"No, not as you are—get yourself cleaned if you can—and come along. I want you to see a plate down there."

"Oh, all right. Well, you go and get out of your togs and I'll be ready in a jiffy," said Jack having carefully cleaned his brushes.

He disappeared into his hut and Todd presently came out and cleared the paint and brushes away—"Ain't such a bad hand at it," he chuckled to himself as he examined his master's work—"I expect if he knew I'd been in this 'ere very line he'd start me on painting for the 'ole of the blessed barracks! Aye but Joseph Todd ain't such an ass as to let on what'll get hisself a mint o' work without a blessed penny to show for it—No, Joseph Todd ain't quite such an ass as that."

In less than ten minutes Jack Trevor came out of the hut looking as spry and span in his light summer clothes, as if he had never heard of such things as old chairs and tables in all his life. He went across to Carlton's hut and knocked on the door with the handle of his walking-stick.

"Ready, old chap?" he shouted.

Carlton opened the door—"I was just coming over to you," he said—and then the two officers turned and went away together in the direction of the town.

They had got about half way there when Carlton suddenly uttered an exclamation—"It was Frothingham," he said in a tone of relief.

"What was Frothingham?" asked Jack, a little puzzled to know his meaning.

"Well—it was Lord Frothingham that the new major is connected with," Carlton replied. "I've been trying to think of the name ever since. I fancy he was next to the title at one time, and that old Frothingham married when he was about a hundred and had several children."

"Hard lines for the Major," said Jack, then walked on in silence trying to piece together certain recollections which were hovering in his brain—"Dennis—Frothingham—next to the title—Why I have it!" he cried aloud; "he was the man who married Ethel Mordaunt."

"And who was Ethel Mordaunt?" Carlton asked.

"She was the greatest pal I had when I was a boy, her people's place was next to the Palace at Blankhampton, where I was born, you know. By Jove, what a jolly little soul she was."

Carlton looked aside at him. "First love?" he asked with a comical expression in eyes and mouth.

Jack laughed. "Well, perhaps."

"H'm!" with a disgusted tone.

Jack laughed yet more. "Oh, nothing of that kind—I haven't seen her for—oh! for over twelve years. She was a child in short frocks when I remember her. She's been married for years."

"She's younger than you?"

"Oh, yes, several years."

"Then she can't have been married so many years, old chap. I suppose now you'll spend all your time there."

"You forget, her husband will perhaps break my head if I try that on."

"It's devoutly to be hoped he will," said Carlton, who was never so happy as when with Jack, and greatly resented his being such a favourite as he was with all the married women with whom he was brought into contact.

## CHAPTER VI.—OLD FRIENDS.

"O, for yesterdays to come."

In due time Major Lawrence bade farewell to the Fighting Fifteenth and departed with the usual honours, and in due time Major Dennis appeared upon the scene.

The first impression he made was a distinctly unfavorable one; he was big and loud-voiced, with a hard, weather-beaten face, and an unmistakably cruel mouth. The first day he showed in barracks or in the first mess-room, the Colonel brought him in just before lunch and introduced him to all the officers assembled there. Monty Carlton opened his eyes a little more than usual, remembering that Jack Trevor had spoken of this man's wife as a girl, a pretty girl.

Jack was not in the room at the time, but he came in after a few minutes and slipped into his place beside Carlton. "Who is that?" he asked in an undertone.

"New Major," replied Carlton.

Jack's eyebrows went up and the corners of his mouth went down—"That Ethel Mordaunt's husband, that coarse-mouthed, hard-faced, loud-voiced brute—now he understood the old nurse's reticence, now he knew the meaning of the severe lines about her mouth; that Ethel's husband! It was incredible to him, incredible."

"By Jove!" his thoughts ran, "how she must have altered after I left Blankhampton. I suppose she has grown the very counterpart of her mother by this time."

"What do you think of him?" murmured Carlton in his ear, at that moment.

"I don't think anything at all," answered Jack a shade sharply, "the outside of a man makes very little difference one way or the other," and then he went on wondering how in the world a marriage could be any possibility have come about or even been brought about between such a man as Major Dennis and his old friend and first love, Ethel Mordaunt.

Immediately after lunch he went round and asked the Colonel to introduce him to Major Dennis. "I believe, Sir," he said in his pleasant voice, "that I have the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Dennis."

"Indeed," returned the Major without in any way helping him.

"It she was Miss Mordaunt of the Cliffe, Blankhampton," Jack went on.

"Yes, my wife was Miss Mordaunt," said the Major.

"My father was the Bishop of Blankhampton," said Jack—"and the Cliffe is next to the Palace. Miss Mordaunt and I were children together and great friends."

"Ah! really—first love I suppose and all that," said the Major with a harsh laugh. The Colonel looked surprised and not a little disgusted; Jack drew his head up rather stiffly and answered in scarcely such a pleasant voice as he had spoken in before. "I have not seen her for over twelve years, Sir—I cannot even say if she remembers me."

As the Colonel maintained a dead silence and Jack had not so much as the ghost of a smile on his face, it must have occurred to Major Dennis that he had said something which would have been better left unsaid. At all events, he burst into a somewhat unmitigated laugh and patted Jack lightly on the shoulder. "Ah! well, joking apart, I daresay Mrs. Dennis will remember you well enough. Come down to the hotel and see her. She hated leaving the old regiment though she didn't want to go to India—but she doesn't think much of Chertsey, from what she has seen so far, and I fancy an old friend's face will be a perfect godsend to her."

Jack's face cleared instantly. "Thank you very much, Sir. I should like to see Mrs. Dennis again immensely. Will she be at home this afternoon?"

"Oh! I should think so. I shall not be able to get back till after five, but you can look in when you like, you know."

"Thank you very much, Sir," said Jack gratefully.

It happened to be a clear afternoon for him, and when he had finished his cigarette Jack strolled into Carlton's hut. "Monty," he said carelessly—"I'm going down to call on Mrs. Dennis. Will you come?"

"No," said Carlton promptly, "you'll get on very well without me."

"Oh! I don't be rusty, old chap, come along," Jack urged.

"Not to-day, my friend."

"But you'll have to go some time or other."

"I daresay I shall."

"Then why not do it now as well as to-morrow or next week."

"Oh! I mayn't be alive next week, then I shall get off it altogether."

"Monty, what an ass you are."

"I know, I know. But I'm not going to call on anyone to-day."

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