

STRANGELY WEDDED.

A Thrilling Story of Romance and Adventure.

CHAPTER IX.

"WAS IT A WASP?"

In the intercourse of every-day life the friction produced by mere thoughtlessness is far greater than that caused by deliberate selfishness.

In due time Major Dennis returned to Chertsey Camp from London, reaching home in the most boisterous good spirits possible and bringing his wife a pretty diamond brooch as an offering. He professed himself thoroughly glad to be home again but otherwise did not tell Ethel much of his movements except to mention casually now and again some theatre to which he had been or some person whom he had seen in the Park or at Hurlingham or St. Anne's.

"And how have you got on, Ethel?" he asked. "Has Trevor been as good as his word and looked after you?"

"Yes, I have even a good deal of him," she answered.

"That's right. I want you to have a good time, my dear," he said brusquely. "I'll bargain for it that you don't see too much of him, you know."

"I shall not do that," she said.

"I daresay not for your amusement—but you'll have to be careful for your name," with a careless laugh.

"Cosmo," Ethel cried in an agony—"don't you care anything for me—not even for my name, your name?"

"Of course I do, to be sure. I was awfully fond of you when we were married, awfully so. Only a man can't go on living in paradise for ever, at least not with the same Eve, don't you know—it stands to common sense that he cannot."

"Oh! Cosmo?"

"My dear girl," said he good-humouredly—"isn't it much better to speak out plainly? You never cared a brass farthing about me—probably if you had I should never have married you—gad, I never wanted to marry any other woman, give you my word. But, as I say, one can't go on for ever and I don't want to shut you up like a nun because I'm no longer as mad about you as I was four years ago—why, it wouldn't be reason, and I hate unreasonable people, they're so deuced unpleasant and inconvenient, don't you know. Besides, I can trust you—that's the best of you proud, cold women, you make very poor sort of sweethearts but you make devilish good wives—one can always trust you."

Mrs. Dennis turned away with a bitter smile upon her lips, and the Major went off to dress for dinner quite satisfied with his own generosity and magnanimity towards his wife.

"The best of you proud, cold women, you make very poor sort of sweethearts but you make devilish good wives—she repeated under her breath—"poor sort of sweethearts—good wives—oh! my God, if this man could only look into my heart and see just what sort of a sweetheart I could be to some men—to one man, at least. Oh! Cosmo Dennis, if only you knew what a bad wife you have, bad, bad in every thought and wish if not in deed, if you only knew how little she is able to trust herself!"

She was standing at the window looking out over the tall white marguerites and the showy red geraniums, over the bit of garden and the low paling against which the wall-flowers grew and the sweet peas were climbing over the row of huts opposite to the distant sky beyond. She looked, in her trailing white tea-gown and with her shining golden head, like a marguerite herself. How young and lovely she was still, in years but twenty-two, in looks a girl, and alas, in hopelessness and pain of heart, she felt like an old, old woman. She held her hands pressed hard together then, her blue eyes were full of pain, her face was white and tired.

"It is so hard to bear," she said in the same hurt tone, under her breath—"to live with him who has long ago grown tired of me, and to have that other one—ah!" she broke off sharp and short for across the open space between her window and the opposite row of huts, she saw Jack Trevor walk quickly by. He looked at her window and seeing her, saluted, with a gay gesture and a bright smile. She forced her hand to reply and her lips into an answering smile, and then she dropped back into the nearest chair, wishing wildly that she were dead or that she had never been born into this world of mistakes and weariness and suffering.

"I am safe enough," she told herself. "He cares nothing about me—Cosmo may trust me—I am Jack's old friend and play-fellow—that is all."

She was still lying back in the big chair when Major Dennis returned, wearing evening clothes and a smart smoking jacket, a quite gorgeous velvet affair with collars and cuffs of superb embroidery. He turned himself about for her inspection.

"I invested in a new smoking-jacket whilst I was up," he told her, "pretty, isn't it?"

"Quite resplendent," answered Ethel, her eyes still filled with Jack's fair and cleanly beauty.

"So I thought, but Bennett, in Bond Street, you know, says it'll soon tone down. Do you think it will?"

"How should I know. Bennett must be a better judge than I."

"Well, I don't know about that," doubtfully.

"But he made it, didn't he?" She was trying hard to force herself to seem to be interested in his new attire.

"Yes, he made it, supplied the velvet, of course."

"And not the embroidery?"

"Oh! the embroidery—no, I got that elsewhere," he replied rather awkwardly.

Ethel rose from her chair, a somewhat satirical smile curling her lips. "I see. The new Eve gave you the embroidery," she said scornfully, yet very quietly. "What a pity to waste it down here—you will take all the bloom off it."

"Not at all—the bloom ought to be off," cried he, not sorry to find she had accepted the evidence of a new Eve—which, by the bye, he had not intended to let slip to her—so quietly.

"I think on the whole that they got on better than they had done for two years before the Major had exchanged into the 15th. In the old regiment Mrs. Dennis had often been dull and in low spirits, she had been left a good deal alone and Major Dennis had never been able to go away for a few days or even a few hours without feeling more or less of a brute towards her. Now no man

in the world. I take it, likes to feel himself a brute; so he was much inclined to accept the existence of Jack Trevor, his wife's old playfellow, as an entirely unmixed blessing.

They spent the evening very quietly—the Major smoked a couple of cigarettes, and wrote two or three letters, and talked to her a little of what he had done in London. And all the time in Ethel's heart there was raging a wild and fierce tumult. A cry rose up and would hardly be stifled, that her life was harder to bear than it had been before, that the mockery of going on living like this had become a very hell to her, that she neither could nor would continue it.

Yet Mrs. Dennis smoked and chatted complacently on, without a suspicion that his wife sitting quietly sewing at a bit of filmy muslin and lace-work beside the table where the lamp stood, was feeling any different to what she looked, without a suspicion that her exterior of ice covered in truth a very volcano of fire, a mine which might explode under his feet at any moment.

"By the bye, Ethel, is anything going on just now?" he asked suddenly, when it was getting towards bed-time.

"There is a garden-party at Highlight to-morrow," she answered, thinking pleasantly of it because Jack Trevor would be there—"and I believe we are all to be asked to an informal supper afterwards."

"Oh! at Highlight! Are you going?"

"Yes, I have promised to go and—" with a laugh, "I have got a new gown on purpose for it."

"Really. Well, will the dog-cart do to drive you over in?"

"Oh yes, perfectly," she replied.

Accordingly, the following afternoon about 3 o'clock, the Major's very high dog-cart with its bright yellow wheels, came round to the little gate of their hut. A rakish gray was between the shafts, a regular flyer, with satin coat and restless heels. He showed a great objection to settling down at first but after a minute or two brought himself into the pose of a statue his head well in air and his handsome feet extended as far as possible.

Mrs. Dennis did not keep him waiting very long, indeed as the Major opened the front door, she came out of her bedroom.

"Hello, is that the new frock?" he asked—"let's have a look at you. 'Pon my word it's very pretty—I feel quite proud of going out with you."

"I am highly honoured," cried Ethel turning herself about—she was in high spirits and his little compliment pleased her.

It was certainly a pretty gown, plain and simple of soft creamy flannel with a smart sailor hat bound with a cream ribbon, on her fair head. She carried over her arm a coat of stone coloured cloth with a coachman's cape or rather set of capes. "Is it cold?" she asked.

"Cold, no—you'll be smothered if you wear that thing," he answered.

"I shall be smothered in dust if I don't," she replied—"but I think it will be enough to keep me warm coming home. You know it is twice as cold in that high trap as it is in the victoria."

A prettier or more winsome woman surely no man ever helped into a high dog-cart, and Major Dennis swung himself into his place beside her, feeling quite in a glow of satisfaction.

"'Pon my word," his thoughts ran, "there's nothing like a little outside interest and attention for smartening a married woman up. Why, I shall be falling in love over again if I don't look out."

Mrs. Dennis cast a glance towards the mess—yes, the coach was there already. The Major saw her look. "Would you rather have gone on the coach?" he asked.

"Oh! I don't care at all."

"Because you couldn't have had the box seat and I've no idea of your sitting behind, don't you know?"

"Oh! no. I like this much better," she replied.

They swept through the gates as she spoke and once on a bit of open road the gray went like steam towards the town.

"Don't go through the town at this pace, will you Cosmo?" she asked.

Major Dennis laughed—"I shall find myself in the police-station if I do," he answered.

"I wonder if you would mind stopping at Jefferson's for a minute—only for a minute? I left my little scent bottle there to be recharged."

He raised no objection and when they reached the narrow High Street, pulled up the gray at the door of the chemist's shop.

"Is my little smelling-bottle ready?" Ethel asked.

"Yes, Ma'am—" and away he ran into the shop again to get it.

What happened next was all over in an instant and Ethel hardly knew how it came about, but just as the man returned with the neat little white parcel in his hand and gave it to Mrs. Dennis, the Major exclaimed—"Damnation!" under his breath and gave the gray horse a cut with the whip such as sent him off at a frantic gallop along the narrow street. Nor did he moderate his pace until they had got a good mile upon the road towards High-flight when with some difficulty his master pulled him up to a walk.

"What was the matter?" asked Ethel who had been holding on to the side of the trap in sheer desperation, expecting every moment to be dashed to the stones.

"Nothing—nothing—I think something stung me," and he put up his hand to his neck, as if to show that the mischief was there.

"Was it a wasp? Does it hurt much now?" she asked; she had never loved this man, she knew that he was tired of her, she guessed that he went after other gods—yet in one moment, she was all tenderness for his supposed hurt.

He looked down into her anxious eyes with a smile which but barely covered the fear which still lingered in his. "I'm afraid I frighten your wits out of you every now and then, Ethel," he said with a rough sort of apology. "Really, I'm awfully sorry—but the fact was I was startled and made a cut at the horse without thinking what I was doing—and the brute resents being reminded of the whip at all."

"Then you were not badly stung," she cried.

"No—a mere nothing; a year or two ago I should never have noticed it. 'Pon my word I fancy my nerves are going—I shall have to cut the Service and travel for a while."

"Alone?" she asked scarce above a whisper, her lips had gone white, her cheeks were pale, her whole face seemed to have grown drawn and haggard in a moment, drawn and haggard and old.

"Alone—of course not. I—but there, what's the use of talking about that? I'm seedy, out of sorts altogether, but I shall be all right after a bit, when I have got my nerves pulled together a little."

He laughed as he spoke and began to talk about other things, once or twice looking back to see if the coach was in sight or not. They were more than half way to Highflight ere it appeared, however and the Major urged the gray to put his best leg forward so that the others might not overtake them.

By the time they pulled up at the portico at Highflight, Major Dennis was in the wild, and most boisterous spirits imaginable, but the color had not come back to his wife's lips and her face was pale and drawn still.

The coach was but just behind, and Trevor jumped down in time to help Mrs. Dennis to the ground. "Are you not well?" he asked in an undertone.

"A little tired," she whispered back.

"Come and speak to Mrs. Petre and then let me get you a glass of wine or some tea. Were you cold driving?"

"No, my coat is warm," she answered, "but the horse bolted in the High Street and never stopped for more than a mile and—"

"And frightened you to death—Poor little woman! Really," he added, as he slipped off her coat, "I wonder the Major likes to drive such a brute."

"It wasn't the horse's fault—Cosmo touched him with the whip and he won't bear the whip at all."

"Why he goes like the wind."

"He didn't do it on purpose—something startled him and he threw out his arm and—Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Petre? What a lovely day you have for your party."

"So glad to see you," returned the hostess—"And Mrs. Dennis, you will stay on to supper, won't you?"

"You are very kind—we shall be delighted."

"And you, Mr. Trevor?"

"I have been hoping to be asked," he said with a laugh. "I shall be only too pleased."

Then other guests streamed in and their hostess's attention was taken away from them. "Come and have some tea," said Jack tenderly.

In truth he was somewhat frightened by her blanched face and drawn look. "You must have been terribly frightened, Ethel," he said, as he found her seat.

"I was—but I shall be all right now," she said trying to smile. "As I told you the other day, Jack, my nerves have all gone to pieces. Cosmo says that his nerves have gone too, so we shall be a pleasant couple by and by."

He laughed as he went away at the idea of anything being amiss with Major Dennis's nerves; and in two minutes he came back with a glass of champagne and a plate of strawberries and cream. "Drink this and I'll get you another—it will pick you up better than anything else," he said sitting down beside her.

"I'm afraid my brains would go after my nerves," she returned smiling—but she drank half the champagne and ate the strawberries declaring herself better. "There, I have finished it all. No, not a drop more. Why, I should be mad to take more—I can only just manage this. Now, put my plate and glass down and let us go out into the garden and see all the world."

Jack was nothing loth, and together they went out to see all the world, which very soon resolved itself into a dim but charming fernery where a most seductive rustic seat invited them to rest awhile and study "all the world" in single specimens.

"Well," said Jack easily, stretching his long legs out and speaking in a thoroughly happy and comfortable tone—"Well, and what is the latest news, Ethel?"

"The latest news, Jack," she answered—"is that Major Dennis has more than a thought of what he calls 'cutting the Service' altogether."

Jack sat bolt upright in an instant. "Cutting the Service," he echoed—"but why? I thought he was so keen on soldiering."

"So did I?"

"And what would you do? Where would you live?"

"I don't know. He talks of travelling indefinitely," she answered.

"Without you?"

"No—I should have to go too," she replied.

There was a moment's dead silence, a moment during which a new idea was born in Jack Trevor's mind. "And you—you would be sorry to leave the—regiment?" he asked in a curiously strained voice.

"I," she repeated—"I—yes, I should be sorry," and then she turned her head away, but not before Jack Trevor had seen that her eyes were filled with tears.

CHAPTER X.

MADemoiselle Valerie.

"Evils anticipated are twice endured." A few days, however, went by and nothing more was said of Major Dennis's possible intention of leaving the Service. More than once Jack Trevor thought of it, thought of it and dismissed the idea as a ridiculous one not worth troubling over. Yet he could not shut his eyes to the truth, that of late he had begun to regard his Major's wife in a new light. Up to the present time, that is to say during the few weeks that the Dennises had been at Chertsey, he had looked upon her only as his old friend and playfellow, as a new and charming interest in his existence and had even spoken of her to Monty Carlton—and much to that young man's disgust—as the best chum he had ever had in all his life.

He had been all along so sorry that her husband was not more congenial to her and he had felt the deepest commiseration for the young healthy active nature that, from almost the time of his father's death, had evidently been cramped and warped in every way.

But now—now when he was forced to see all too plainly that she had practically no hand in arranging the plan of their life, he began to feel differently towards her! He began to feel indignation as well as pity! He had gathered that if the Major chose to throw up his commission and take to a wandering existence, Ethel would have no power to influence him otherwise, and the very thought of her being dragged about from one foreign hotel to another without a child to comfort her, without a mother to stand by her, or a husband who would be anything of a companion to her, was enough

to madden him. And yet he was so helpless, what could he do for her? Simply nothing! She was Dennis's wife, and the oldest of friends cannot with reason or justice interfere between man and wife having no better excuse than the facts that there was a disparity of years between them and that their dispositions were not congenial to each other.

However, Major Dennis seemed to have forgotten his suggestion and also in a measure to recover his good spirits, at least Monty Carlton complained to Trevor with a disdainful air of fretfulness one day, "Really Dennis is getting positively bloated with wit."

"Eh?" said Jack, looking up sharply. Carlton repeated his assertion. "The brute fired off two stale old chestnuts out of 'the pink 'un' this morning—more than half the fellows shrieked with delight though they had all read them in print years ago. However, Dennis shot them off with an air as if he had just made 'em and as I said, six or seven idiots laughed."

"And you didn't?" asked Trevor, waiting patiently for the end of the little yarn.

"I"—with supreme disgust—"I! I wouldn't have moved a muscle of my face if my life itself had depended on my doing it. Why I wouldn't laugh at his jokes if they'd been new, and I certainly wouldn't condescend to even grin at anybody's jokes that were years old."

"No—I suppose not," commented Jack rather absently—"I am always finding myself wondering why Dennis ever tries to make a joke at all. It's not because he's a genial sort of a chap or loves a joke a bit—he doesn't. As a general rule, if you take notice, he either doesn't see a joke or else he laughs in the wrong place."

"I'll tell you what it is," rejoined the other with perfect seriousness—"as soon as I get my majority I shall retire."

"But why?" Trevor cried.

"Because,"—solemnly—"although the Service is an excellent school for a young man—there's none better—it plays the very devil with a man over five and thirty. For a subaltern nothing can be better—a younger man learns to think little of himself, to respect place and rank, to be respectful to his superiors, and under the old system, when a man often went on till he was fifty before he got a command, everything worked well enough up to the very end. A man got seasoned and his place settled before he became a field-officer. But now, as soon as he gets over thirty he begins to look for his majority, and a precious ass he generally makes of himself when he's got it. How do you account otherwise for nearly all officers over the rank of Major being such prosy old bores as they are?"

"I can't account for it," Jack answered smiling. "I only know that it is so."

"I'll tell you in a word. Take a brute like Dennis for instance. He's a senior and he has to be listened to whenever he chooses to speak. Let him tell ever such drivelling rot in the form of a story and nine subalterns out of ten either listen with respectful attention or applaud him with uproarious laughter. They've got to practically—it's the right thing to do and they do it. 'Pon my soul, it would be a good thing for the Service at large if all senior officers were forbidden to tell stories of any kind at the mess-table."

"They couldn't be forbidden to air their opinions," laughed Trevor, "and for my part I'd rather have Dennis's stale chestnuts than his opinions, any day."

"My faith, yes," ejaculated Carlton promptly.

And they were troubled with a good many of Major Dennis's stories during that week at the mess—he seemed as if he did not care to go outside the Fifteenth lines much, and he spent a good deal of his spare time in the ante-room. Not that he had much spare time, for the regiment was in camp for work, not for play, and neither officers nor men led an idle life by any means. Major Dennis for one, complained bitterly of the fearful amount of grind he had to put in (I am using his language now) and expressed an opinion more than once that the game was not worth the candle and that he should throw up the sponge and leave Her Majesty's Service to take care of itself.

"But not till you get the command, Cosmo," Mrs. Dennis put in one day when he had been getting up a special subject for an instruction. "You know you have always had an ambition to have a command."

"Yes—I know—but there's such a devil of a lot of school-master's work now-a-days," he answered.

"Oh! you are tired. Change your clothes and go down to the town with me," she urged. "I want some stamps and books, and the walk will do us both good."

But the Major was not to be drawn out of his ill-temper.

"No, I can't walk down. I've been standing about in the sun all day. I'm as tired as a dog. I'll drive you down if you like."

"Yes—if you'll have the victoria," she replied. "I'd rather not go in the dog-cart if we have to stop at any shops."

"Oh! nonsense—nonsense. I hate being driven—and I can't drive the victoria. Can't you go without me?"

"No—because I know you're bored to death here and want a change," she answered. "Besides—I dislike going about by myself. Do come, Cosmo."

"You can take Trevor."

He spoke quite good-naturedly, but his wife started and her face whitened a little.

"No, I want you to go with me," she urged. "Do Cosmo—do go."

He looked a little surprised—and for the matter of that, well he might, for never before had Ethel spoken to him in that tone. "Of course I'll go, if you wish it so much," he said, still with the same astonished look on his face—"but I do hate—look here—I'll take the brown horse in the dog-cart, and will wait like a rock as long as you like."

"All right. I'll go and get ready at once."

She was quite joyous at thus having won her point, and was ready in her neat stone-coloured coat and white sailor hat long before the trap came round to the door. She went out and looked at her flowers, picking off a leaf here and there, her heart in quite a glow of gratitude. For in truth Ethel Dennis had come to that point in her life when only this rough unsympathetic coarsely-minded man, who made it no secret that he was tired of her, served to stand between her and the temptation which comes sooner or later to most women.

He came out just as the dog-cart was brought round, a noticeable figure enough, and as they passed through the little gate, Jack Trevor came by and stopped to speak to them. He was a fixture in the camp, being orderly officer for the day.

"Very jolly day," he said cheerfully.

"Are you going far, Ethel?"

"Into the town—I suppose for a drive afterwards," she answered.

In spite of herself the rich roses began to bloom out upon her pale cheeks, and a light to steal into her eyes. Trevor laughed "I envy you," he said, as he helped her into the high dog-cart. "You know one never wants to go for a ride or a drive so badly as when one is tied by the leg here. Is not that so, Sir?" he added to the Major.

"Very much so," answered the Major with a great laugh, as he mounted into his place and took the reins.

Jack Trevor stood watching them until the trap was out of sight. Mind, he had not yet acknowledged to himself that his feelings had altogether changed towards his old playfellow—as yet he only believed that he was grieved and sorry that she should have such a husband as the Major, he only felt a continual sort of irritation whenever he found himself in Major Dennis's presence; he hardly realized that his duty that day seemed more irksome than ever, the square more dull than usual, himself more weary.

"Well, I suppose I must be off," he said as he turned on his heel with a sigh that was almost a groan. "Hollo, what's that?" and then he stooped down and picked up from the ground something lying almost at his foot.

It was a lady's visiting-card, a card with a mourning border and written upon it in a fine Italian hand—

"Mademoiselle Valerie,"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Points in Sheep Feeding.

There is a science in fattening sheep for best results which seems to be not understood or else ignored, says Galen Wilson in Stockman and Farmer.

In the first place, instead of feeding four or five months, seventy-five days is sufficient. They will take on all the flesh in the latter time that it is possible for mature sheep to do. Feeding sheep four or five months is on a par with feeding fowls a month to fatten them, when half the time is all that is necessary. Feeders get into this rut because wethers can be bought cheaper in the fall; and then they have a crop of wool in spring as well as a carcass of mutton. They forget that the wool is worth just as much on the sheep's back as it is off, and good salesmen usually get the value of it, too. And then mutton will bring more in spring than any other time. This used to be the case more than it is now; but granting all these claims, just as much is gained by not commencing grain feeding until sixty or seventy-five days before selling. There is a waste of nearly half the grain when sheep are fed five months, as in the case of fowls that are fed a month. It must be remembered that a ninety or one hundred-pound wether cannot be made to gain more than twelve to twenty pounds, no matter how long fed.

Sheep feeders would do better to step out of this rut and feed younger animals. The following well-authenticated data ought to be convincing: Sheep of the age of seven to ten months for each 100 pounds of digestible material consumed made a gain of fourteen pounds live weight; those ten to thirteen months of age made a gain of twelve and one-half pounds; those from thirteen to eighteen gained ten and seven-tenths pounds, and those from one and one-half to two years old made a gain of five and four-tenths pounds. It is seen that it is far more profitable to feed sheep from seven to twelve months of age than to feed those that are older. Lambs are of quicker sale any time of the year than older sheep, and always bring better prices, weight for weight. Lambs can be fed profitably all winter and sheep not. Wethers will be eliminated from the sheep trade ere long. There is more profit in ewes and lambs. If sheep feeders will try a bunch of lambs and a bunch of mature wethers next winter, keeping strict and separate accounts of all outgoes and incomes, they will abandon wether feeding in the future and feed lambs instead.

When Will the Earth be Full?

Discussing the subject of future population and food supply, from a geographical point of view, Mr. E. G. Ravenstein, in a paper, at the British Association, estimated that the amount of available fertile or comparatively fertile land was over 28,000,000 square miles. The poor lands or steppes amounted to 14,000,000 square miles, and the bare deserts 4,180,000 square miles. Of all Africa we knew very little. Even of China, an ancient empire, we were not at all certain; and in these cases we could only go by analogy. But he estimated that the total population of the earth was 1408 millions. His estimate, so far as Africa was concerned, was a low one. From the most recent information available he could not conscientiously give Africa more than 127,000,000, instead of the two, three, or four hundred millions that some had been disposed to allow. Even 127,000,000 was a high estimate. It meant 11 persons to the square mile, and that was a high number. In North America it was only 14, and in South America 5. Here in Europe it was 101. Suppose this earth could sustain 5,993,000,000, the question was how long it would be before it would be full. He estimated that it would take exactly 192 years, or until 2082 to fill it, and in the ten years which preceded that year there would have been added to the population 435,000,000; but he did not think there need be a tremendous fuss made about this matter, as it was not likely we would see the day when there was no room on this earth.

Bread and Kisses.

She—"Why defer our marriage any longer, George?"

He—"We must wait till my salary is advanced."

"But we might live on bread and kisses."

"All right. I'll furnish the kisses if you skirmish around for the bread."

A Lapsus.

Teacher—How does the earth absorb water?

Pupil—Same as a dog does.

Teacher—How's that?

Pupil—Haven't you heard of a lap of earth? What do you suppose it laps with?

The Oit Rejected.

"You have no sisters, Mr. Cilley, have you?"

"I never had until this summer," said Cilley, sadly. "I've got seven now."