

The Gentleman Ranker.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER V.

Not once during all the years since Max Delmar left his native land had he come home on leave, or for business or pleasure. His leave he had always spent anywhere but in England; there he seemed to have no ties, and long after his early and passionate love for Lilith Ray had died, the blank and the desolation of life remained.

It was years before he could think calmly of her.

But now her presence, her touch, the sound of her voice, would raise no heart-throb, nor quicken by one second the regular beat of his pulses.

In coming to London when ordered home on sick leave, thought it probable that he would meet Lilith.

The meeting might be painful for many reasons, but not insupportable.

General Chevenix, with his niece and her chaperon, had already returned to England, and that was a very potent reason why Captain Delmar should come also; and, besides this, there were some little family affairs to attend to.

Lilith's heart throbbed high with expectation as she read the announcement of Captain Delmar's return.

In her heart she had always cared for him more than for any other, and now that she had plenty of money, there need be no obstacle to happiness.

With a curious fatuity, due to either vanity or ignorance of human nature, Lilith Harwood imagined that ties could be easily taken up again when they were broken off; it never entered her head that Max could have ceased to love her, or that her conduct had, in truth, given the death blow to his love.

'It,' she said, looking into her glass with a smile of triumph, 'my memory should be dimmed in these years. I shall soon be able to draw him to me again!'

And the mirror flashed back at her a sufficiently dazzling reflection to justify her boast.

She had returned to town on purpose to meet her old lover, though she detested town, as a rule, in November.

Still, there were a good many people in town, and she could support existence in her luxurious house, what with theatres, and little dinners, and drives, and callers.

'He will not come to me at once,' she reflected, one dull afternoon about three days after Delmar's arrival in London. 'He would be afraid I should misjudge him; besides he would be proud, as I sent him away. No, I see I shall have to unbend a little,' she added, with her chin on her hand, and a smile just quivering on her lips.

There was something rather alluring to her mind in the idea.

How gracious he would think her!

In what an attractive light would it place her in his eyes!

She waited in vain for the call she expected, grew impatient and anxious, and wondered if she should send him a line.

Was he afraid to come?

Their meeting, however, was not at all arranged as Lilith had fondly rehearsed it to herself over and over again.

They actually met at the house of a friend, who was giving a little dinner, and was unaware that one of the heroes of Omdurman and Lilith, Lady Harwood, had once been friends and lovers.

Lilith, looking exquisite in a marvel of an evening confection, drew in her breath a little when she heard the announcement: 'Captain Delmar,' and the tall, soldierly man entered whom she had sent away so calmly years ago.

How handsome he was, she thought, with a rush of passionate joy—how distinguished how noble!

The woman seemed hardly to breathe as she sat still in her luxurious fauteuil, watching the man she loved, and seeing her hostess bringing him across the room to be introduced.

'Introduced!' She could have laughed if her heart had not been throbbing so!

'Dear Lady Harwood,' the hostess was saying, 'let me present to you Captain Delmar. What! you know each other already? half laughing, as Lilith put out her hand, with a smile, to the tall soldier, who took it quite naturally, but did not hold it a second longer than necessary.

'Oh, yes!' she said, before Delmar could speak; 'we are old friends—very old friends,' with a meaning glance, which Mrs. Lancy understood, as Lilith intended, to convey that there had been something more than friendship between them.

She made some suitable remark, and glided away to receive another guest.

'I heard of you—of that splendid charge,' Lilith said softly, and indicating, by a subtle sweep of her robe, that Delmar might take the seat beside her, and of your wound. But you are well now?'

'Oh! yes,' he answered, smiling, and taking the proffered place, without eagerness, as without hesitation 'there was never anything very serious, though they insisted upon sending me over on sick leave.'

'And are you not glad to come and see—old friends?' Lilith said, glancing under her lids at the handsome face beside her.

'One is always glad to see old friends,' he answered, with a maddening generalization, 'and it is years since I was in England. My work kept me busy enough.'

'Ah! you men, and soldiers!' said Lilith, with a gentle sigh. 'You have always work to keep you—to prevent re-

grets and ennui; not like us poor women, who have nothing, and must do as we are bid!'

'Oh,' Delmar said, with a smile, 'I thought the modern woman was a free agent! I fancy most people do what they want, after all. But here comes our hostess to claim me.'

He rose and bowed as Mrs. Lancy came up, and Lilith could have ground her white teeth to think that she must be paired off with a viscount because he was of higher rank than Delmar.

Lady Harwood could not see much of Max; he was the guest of the evening, and many claimed his attention; Lilith saw that he neither sought nor avoided her.

She watched him narrowly, but found never a glance wandering her way; when he spoke to her, never a softened intonation.

So then, he was proud and still angry with her, thought the woman; well, she must abate her pride.

'Why have you not been to see me?' she said to him once. 'You have been in town—how long?'

'Ten days or so; my time is very much taken up, Lady Harwood, and I have scarcely been anywhere,' the soldier answered, smiling. 'I owe an apology for being so remiss.'

'Oh, no; of course, I know you cannot always do what you wish! And General Chevenix is in town, is he not? I haven't seen Beryl for years. Let me see, she is not married yet? Singular; but she is not what one calls very brilliant—I mean her style of beauty.'

'She will not attract butterflies, if that is your meaning,' answered Max, with a perfect ease that soothed the woman's jealous pangs.

He could not speak so indifferently if he found Beryl very attractive, she told herself.

'Come and see me,' she said; 'soon—very soon.'

'With pleasure. What is your day?' 'Oh! Lilith said hastily, and with a half reproach, 'one doesn't receive old friends on one's day.' Come when you like; I shall be at home always, between six and eight. Now, I rely on you,' with an arch glance and uplifted forefinger; and Delmar bowed, but made no promise.

Lilith was obliged to be satisfied; she dared not go further now.

But she was angry, and as she drove home she bit her lips and clenched her hands.

'He must love me still,' she said, between her teeth. 'He shall not—dare not scorn me! But he is proud. It is I who must—'

She broke off.

Captain Delmar, however, did not call for a tete-a-tete with Lilith, but came on her day—after six, true, but when there were still many callers.

Her rooms indeed were pretty full, as he knew they would be, and a distinct pang of disappointment went through Lilith's heart as she saw the guest enter.

She bit her lip and was half angry, but smoothed her face as she went forward to greet one of the heroes of Omdurman.

'How good of you to come!' she said, as she gave him her hand.

She deluded herself into the belief that Delmar held hers a little longer than usual; but it was she who left her hand in his, though Max scarcely noticed this.

She could not, however, keep him to herself, since she had other guests to attend to.

She wished them further, it is true, but the conventions of society do not permit one to say to one's guests—

'Now do please go; you're only in the way!'

And so Lilith had to smile and be sweet, when her eye was feverishly seeking the whereabouts of Max Delmar, and she was trying to make an opportunity to ask him to stay and dine with her. Would he do so? she wondered.

Of course, Delmar was much sought,

and he paused to talk with this one and that, thereby arousing fresh jealousy, and he had not been doing in the room when a fresh obstacle arose to postpone her opportunities of speech with him.

'General and Miss Chevenix,' announced the footman.

Lilith turned her head quickly.

Her eyes darted to where Delmar stood talking with a pretty girl, but she could not make out whether Beryl's arrival was of any particular moment to him, though the question did rush to her mind—

'Was this arranged?'

She received the new-comers with warmth, however.

'So delighted, dear general! It's ages since we met! Beryl, it's a century since I saw you! You must come and see me for a real chat!' she said, in her sweetest manner. 'Captain Delmar is here.'

She watched Beryl furtively as she said this, but the latter was not now an ingenué of sixteen, and knew how to guard her face from betraying her heart.

'So I see,' she answered, smiling.

She had known, in fact, that he was coming though she did not divine that his coming had to do with her, she having, in all innocence, expressed a half formed intention of calling on Lilith Harwood that day.

'Here he is, coming to talk to my uncle, she added; and Max made his way to the little group, and talk became general.

One by one the other guests dropped off, and at last the Chevenixes, too, were about to take leave; Max rising also, as if to go with them.

'Oh! but' cried Lilith deprecatingly, 'I had hoped you would not run away as though we were just acquaintances. Stop and dine with me. Never mind about evening dress—no ceremony—only myself. Captain Delmar, you will? And, Beryl, you can't have the heart to say "No."'

'I shall be very pleased,' Beryl answered, 'if uncle has no engagement.'

'None that can stand against the charm of your society, Lady Harwood,' answered the general gallantly; 'and I'm certain Max has none.'

Max had none, since he found that Beryl was going to stay though Lilith believed she herself was the point of attraction.

It ought to have been an ideal little dinner-party, but it was not.

The inward elements of cohesion and sympathy were wanting.

Lilith was not really at ease; she was ever on the watch to see how Beryl stood to Delmar and Delmar to her.

Beryl, with a woman's instinct, at once divined Lilith's attitude to them both, and she could not be sure whether Max was not drawn to his early love once again.

Why should it not be so? Yet the thought made her unhappy, and she was glad when it was time to go.

The evening had not been an unmixed pleasure to anyone, not even to Delmar, though he was far from fathoming Lilith's feelings towards himself.

Lilith parted cordially from Beryl, and trusted she would come again soon.

She endeavored to keep Max a little longer, but he accepted the seat in General Chevenix's carriage offered him, and Lilith could have ground her teeth to see them all drive off together.

She met Captain Delmar several times after this at one place or another—met him in the Park, riding, exchanged a few words with him at the theatre—put out all her powers to charm and attract, but apparently without success.

He never called for that tete-a-tete which she had promised herself, and the one solitary day on which he did come to see her again was her 'At Home' day, when, as before, he arrived a little after six.

Still, the infatuated woman comforted herself with the thought that Max loved her, and only was too proud to plead again.

She told herself that she only wanted him to forgive her.

She would tell how sorry she was for the past, and she really persuaded herself it would be only right to do so.

She thought herself very heroic when she said to herself—

'Well, if he will not come to me, I will stoop my woman's pride and do what is right, in spite of all conventions. What care I for these stupid rules? Why shall two lives be blasted because a man and a woman are both proud? He will not misjudge me. He will only honour me the more for being the first to fling aside all pride for love of him.'

CHAPTER VI.

Beryl suffered many a heart ache in those days.

In society it was openly canvassed among those who had some knowledge of the past whether Captain Delmar would not make brilliant marriages with his early love.

'She's dead in love with him,' was said at tea tables.

'He doesn't see through it,' laughed a shrewd lady, whom few things escaped.

'To see her manoeuvring to get him to herself—it's awful fun!'

'Very degrading, I think!' said a girl, with old fashioned notions.

'I daresay he sees it, and is flattered thereby. They're all alike,' said another; 'burn enough incense, and you can do anything you choose with them.'

'He isn't concealed like most men,' replied the old fashioned girl, who genuinely admired the handsome Lancer. 'I don't believe he's dazzled; I think it's Miss Chevenix he cares for.'

'Ah! she's not so brilliant as Lady Harwood.'

'She's worth ten thousand of her!' cried the old fashioned girl enthusiastically.

And so the talk went on.

Beryl was vaguely unhappy, for how should she be able to say for certain that Max Delmar was not reuniting to his first love?

If he loved her—Beryl—why did he not speak?

True, there was a discrepancy in their fortunes; but surely he would not suffer that to come between them?

He was proud, she knew, and would shrink from the imputation of being a fortune-hunter; but then again, that same pride might forbid him to ask Lilith for her hand.

'If it were any one else,' Beryl thought sadly, 'I would try to rejoice—it he were to be happy! But that he would never be with her.'

Only one saw any sign of all that troubled her, however.

Beryl knew how to guard her secret.

But Max Delmar loved her, and his eyes were keen where she was concerned.

She looked, he thought, tired sometimes troubled, and was less bright in manner: a hundred little things that she had no idea of were signs to her lover, telling him that for some cause she suffered.

'Am I in fault?' he said in his heart, and the thought somehow brought its own sweetness. 'Am I letting my pride be a burden to her? Does she care—does she think I have not forgotten Lilith? Lilith! Could I ever have passed Beryl by for her? Besides now, surely I may speak—surely I dare hope that Beryl will not refuse to listen!'

He had no right to make her suffer, at any rate, and resolved to put his fate to the hazard.

If Lilith Harwood, while she was thus making plans to recapture her former lover, could have been present in spirit in Beryl's own study one afternoon when she—Lilith—in vain awaited him, all her hope would have been dashed to the ground.

For he was kneeling by Beryl's side, and looking up with worshipping eyes to hers, and was telling her softly how he loved her.

'It is my heart's best love,' he said.

And Beryl understood him, and let him draw her to his breast and kiss the soft lips at his will.

'It was in my heart, dearest, almost on my lips,' he said, after a time, 'to betray my secret to you when you came to me in Cairo, when I was in your father's house. But honor forbade it, when you and he were so nobly kind to me, and—'

He paused, and the color rose to his cheek.

Beryl, divining what was in his mind, said, a little archly:

'You thought Miss Chevenix, the heiress might misunderstand. Oh! Max, couldn't you trust me?'

'Dearest, it was not only that; but I was a soldier, living a soldier's roving life, and I had nothing.'

'But you are a soldier now,' answered Beryl, smiling, 'and will go wherever duty orders you. And I have so much Max. I—I want—half passionately—to give it all to you. Why did you let that stand between us?'

The half reproach thrilled the man's heart in its unconscious confession of love.

He could only clasp her to him and in mute caresses atone for the pride which in part had been the cause of his silence.

'I thought sometimes,' Beryl said very low, 'that you had not, could not, forget Lady Harwood.'

'My love for her died years ago,' Max answered steadily. 'I want you to understand, darling, that there is no regret in my heart. That is what I meant when I said you have my best love. I loved Lilith—you have the right to know everything. Beryl—I loved her, and it was long before I could forget; longer still before the blank that dead love left was filled.'

'Even as a boy of twenty, I loved more deeply than I think most lads of that age love. But you have all my heart, my life, my soul. When I met Lilith Harwood, there was not one heart-throb the quicker for her presence. I could touch her hand without the tremor of mine. And I know now that my manhood would never have endorsed the passion of my youth. After all, Beryl, she did me the kindest thing to send me from her.'

'For you, yes; but the motive spoils it. Gods knows I would condemn no woman willingly!' Beryl said; 'but, girl as I was then—child almost—I felt how cruel she was. Don't let us speak of it, Max. You know I trust you utterly.'

To which Max answered only with a lover's kiss.

General Chevenix was delighted when Delmar told him how things stood between him and Beryl.

'While I had nothing but my pay,' Max said, 'I held it only honorable to be silent but since returning to England, I find that some speculations of my father's, which for a long time, were worth nothing, have turned out well, and I am more on equal terms as regards my financial position.'

'My dear boy,' the general answered, warmly, 'I shouldn't care if you hadn't a penny. I've got enough for both of you, and Beryl won't want, either in my life or after my death. This has always been my dream. I know my Beryl will be happy with you.'

The old man's voice trembled, and there were almost tears in his eyes.

'You have been like a son to me,' he said, 'now you will be really almost a son, for I think of Beryl as my daughter though she is only my niece. What will some-body say, though?' the general added, with a humorous twinkle in his eye.

'That's all done with,' answered Delmar.

'On your part, yes—not on the lady's I expect!'

'Oh, yes,' Delmar said rather quickly, there was nothing on her part; and besides years have passed since then.'

'Lilith would have married you, Max, if you could have given her, but she wanted to be a peeress, and have a great position. Well she had her wish; but I don't fancy she got much happiness with it. She didn't deserve it!'

'She was very young,' Max said gently.

But the general only shook his head, thought Max a very fine fellow to shield a woman, and kept his own opinion.

But the thought troubled Delmar.

He was no coxcomb, and to him it was no pleasure to think that a woman who had once clouded his life, would be unhappy for his sake.

'He is mistaken,' he said to himself.

'Why should she care? She has everything and will look much higher than a moderately-off captain of Lancers.'

So he put the idea away from him, and did not let it cloud his happiness.

When Max had gone, Beryl stole softly down to her uncle's room, where she knew he was.

He was sitting by the fire with his head leaning on his hand, looking a little grave, perhaps a little sorrowful.

But, the moment Beryl entered, he looked up, and his face brightened.

The girl came swiftly to him, and knelt at his feet, and the general drew her pretty head to him and kissed her fondly.

'So my little girl is going to leave me,' he said cheerfully, but with an unmistakable pathos in his voice, and Beryl looked up with tears in her eyes.

'Oh, uncle! she said earnestly, 'We will never leave you alone. You have been a father to me. I could never think of deserting you.'

He stroked her hair, with a half smile on his lips.

'I couldn't have Miss Grey with me, you know, dear,' with a twinkle in his eyes; and Beryl lifted her head.

'It doesn't do, my child,' her uncle added, still stroking the girl's sunny hair, 'to have an old—'

'Elderly, uncle! You aren't old!'

'Well, elderly fogey.'

'You're not a fogey, uncle! I won't have you call yourself one!'

'Tut, tut! you little witch! No wonder Max has gone over head and ears,' said the general, laughing. 'Will you let me finish now? Young folk are best by themselves. My ways wouldn't be Delmar's ways; and, in short, you'd both be shying off somewhere, and I couldn't be with you. I'm off active service now. This wound of mind doesn't allow me to hop about as you do.'

'Well, uncle? The moral of all this long discourse?' said mischievous Beryl.

'Well, dear, the moral is this: Should you think your uncle an old fool if he asked some nice, sensible, clever, affectionate woman—'

'Some one like Miss Grey, for instance?' said Miss Chevenix demurely.

'Yes—well, yes,' returned the general. 'Should you, Beryl, think me an old fool if I married at my time of life?'

'Your dear old darling!' cried Beryl, throwing her arms around his neck. 'No, of course not! You! why, you are a hundred times nicer than all the young men—except Max—put together! Why you are so handsome, and upright as a dart—and—'

'Stop, stop! you'll make me quite vain, you little puss,' said her uncle, laughing. 'So you like the idea?'

'Very much. I shall have a real auntie, then. Miss Grey has always been like mother to me. Oh! but,' said Beryl, 'suppose—'

'She doesn't say "Yes"?' Ah, that's all settled, my dear. Some time ago we arranged that, when you were married, she would do me the honour to become my wife,' said the general simply. 'I said nothing to you, dear, because I knew you would unselfishly give up your own position to make me happy. But I didn't think that fair, and my dear Marian agreed with me; we could wait. I knew Delmar was in love with you, or thought it, at any rate. Now you are settled, we can settle, too, and it'll make no difference in your position. You'll have plenty when I go, and plenty while I live.'

Beryl looked up to the kind eyes that met hers, with a mist of tears in her own.

'Uncle, you are a hero!' she said, with a break in her voice, and laid her soft cheek to his, and was silent for a long time.

'Auntie Marian,' she said after a while—'how nice that sounds—will have one of the most unselfish of husbands.'

Then she sprang up.

'Will she mind, if I go and—and hug her?' she concluded, laughing.

'And, receiving permission to do this, she ran off to find 'Auntie,' and tell her how delighted she was with the state of affairs.'

CHAPTER VII.

The evening of the next day, Max Delmar sat in his rooms alone, reading, or trying to read, for Beryl's sweet face came between him and his pages, and he was dreaming of her more often than following the printed words in the book.

This evening he could not be with Beryl as she had a long standing engagement to fulfil with a friend in the country, so, not caring to go out, he had elected to spend a solitary evening.

About eight o'clock his man entered.

'There is a lady asking to see you, sir,' he said; 'she will not give her name.'

'A lady!' Delmar said, a little puzzled. Then it crossed him it might be some anxious relative of an officer or a man he had known, come in the hope of hearing of some last words of husband, or father, or brother.

Such pathetic instances are not rare in the experiences of soldiers.

'I will see her, Jameson,' he said, after that brief pause.

And Jameson retired, a moment or two later ushering in a tall woman, closely veiled.