

PLAYING WITH FIRE

A STORY OF THE SOUDAN WAR

BY

JAMES GRANT

Table of Contents

- CHAPTER I. MERLWOOD.
- CHAPTER II. HESTER MAULE.
- CHAPTER III. KASHGATE—A RETROSPECT.
- CHAPTER IV. PLAYING WITH FIRE.
- CHAPTER V. THE COUSINS.
- CHAPTER VI. ANNOT DRUMMOND.
- CHAPTER VII. 'IS SHE NOT PASSING FAIR?'
- CHAPTER VIII. 'IT WAS NO DREAM.'
- CHAPTER IX. THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW.
- CHAPTER X. ROLAND'S HOME-COMING.
- CHAPTER XI. A COLD RECEPTION.
- CHAPTER XII. MAUDE.
- CHAPTER XIII. ROLAND'S VEXATION.
- CHAPTER XIV. MAUDE'S SECRET.
- CHAPTER XV. MR. HAWKEY SHARPE SEEKS COUNSEL.
- CHAPTER XVI. 'FOOL'S PARADISE.'
- CHAPTER XVII. AT EARLSHAUGH.
- CHAPTER XVIII. 'MY LOVE SHE'S BUT A LASSIE YET.'
- CHAPTER XIX. HESTER RECEIVES A PROPOSAL.
- CHAPTER XX. MR. SHARPE MAKES A MISTAKE.
- CHAPTER XXI. MALCOLM SKENE.

CHAPTER XXII. A FATAL SHOT.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE CITY OF THE CALIPHS—OCTOBER
IN THE LAND OF THE PHARAOHS.

CHAPTER XXIV. JACK ELLIOT'S PERIL.

CHAPTER XXV. THE WILL.

CHAPTER XXVI. MOLOCH.

CHAPTER XXVII. ANNOT'S MISGIVINGS.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE FIRST OF OCTOBER.

CHAPTER XXIX. ALARM AND ANXIETY.

CHAPTER XXX. THE KELPIE'S CLEUGH.

CHAPTER XXXI. 'ALL OVER NOW!'

CHAPTER XXXII. PELION ON OSSA.

CHAPTER XXXIII. A TANGLED SKEIN.

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE PRESENTIMENT.

CHAPTER XXXV. LOST IN THE DESERT.

CHAPTER XXXVI. ALONE!

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE FIRST QUARREL.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE CRISIS.

CHAPTER XXXIX. TURNING THE TABLES.

CHAPTER XL. THE NEW POSITION.

CHAPTER XLI. THE CAPTIVE.

CHAPTER XLII. THE ZEREBBA OF SHEIKH MOUSSA.

CHAPTER XLIII. A MARRIAGE.

CHAPTER XLIV. THE TROOPSHIP.

CHAPTER XLV. THE DEATH WRESTLE.
CHAPTER XLVI. MAUDE'S VISITOR.
CHAPTER XLVII. THE RESULT.
CHAPTER XLVIII. 'INFIRM OF PURPOSE!'
CHAPTER XLIX. CHRISTMAS DAY IN CAMP AT KORTI.
CHAPTER L. THE START FOR KHARTOUM.
CHAPTER LI. THE MARCH IN THE DESERT.
CHAPTER LII. THE PRESENTIMENT FULFILLED.
CHAPTER LIII A HOMEWARD GLANCE.
CHAPTER LIV. THE LONG-SUSPENDED SWORD.
CHAPTER LV. WITH GENERAL EARLE'S COLUMN.
CHAPTER LVI. THE BATTLE OF KIRBEKAN.
CHAPTER LVII. THE SICK CONVOY.
CHAPTER LVIII. IN THE SHOUBRAH GARDENS.
CHAPTER LIX. CONCLUSION.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

CHAPTER I. MERLWOOD.

"Pon my word, cousin, I think I should actually fall in love with you, but that—that——"

'What?' asked the girl, with a curious smile.

'One so seldom falls in love with one they have known for a life long.'

The girl sighed softly, and said, still smiling sweetly:

'Looking upon her as almost a sister, you mean, Roland.'

'Or almost as a brother, as the case may be.'

'Then how about Paul and Virginia? They knew each other all their lives, and yet loved each other tenderly.'

'Or desperately, rather, Hester; but that was in an old story book greatly appreciated by our grandmothers.'

'Instead of talking nonsense here, I really think you should go home, Roland,' said the girl, with a tone of pain and pique at his nonchalant manner; 'home for a time, at least.'

'To Earlshaugh?'

'Yes.'

'Are you tired of me already, Hester?'

'Tired of you, Roland?—oh, no,' replied the girl softly, while playing with the petals of a flower.

The speakers were Roland Lindsay, a young captain of the line, home on leave from Egypt, and his cousin, Hester Maule, a handsome girl in her eighteenth year; and the scene in which they figured was a shady, green and well-wooded grassy bank that sloped down to the Esk, in front of the pretty villa of Merlwood, where he swung lazily in a net hammock between two beautiful laburnum-trees, smoking a cigar, while she sat on the turf close by, with a fan of peacock feathers in her slim and pretty hand, dispersing the midges that were swarming under the trees in the hot sunshine of an August evening.

While the heedless fellow who swung there, enjoying his cigar and his hammock, and the charm of the whole situation, twitted her with her unconcern, Hester—we need not conceal the fact—loved him with a love that now formed part of her daily existence; while he accorded her in return the half-careless affection of a brother, or as yet little more.

At his father's house of Earlshaugh, at his uncle's villa of Merlwood, and elsewhere, till he had joined his regiment, they had been brought up together, and together had shared all the pleasures and amusements of childhood. In the thick woods of Earlshaugh, and along the sylvan banks of the Esk, in the glorious summer and autumn days, it had been their delight to clamber into thick and leafy bowers—vast and mysterious retreats to them—where, with the birds around them, and the flowers, the ivy, and the ferns beneath their feet, they wove fairy caps of rushes and coned their tasks, often with cheek laid against cheek and ringlets intermingled; and in their days of childhood Roland had often told her tales of

what they would do and where they would go when they became man and wife, and little Hester wondered at the story he wove, as it seemed impossible that they could ever be happier than they were then. He always preferred her as a companion and playmate to his only sister Maude, greatly to the indignation of that young lady.

She had borne her part in many of Roland's boyish pastimes, even to spinning tops and playing marbles, until the days came when they cantered together on their sturdy little Shetlands through Melville Woods and by the braes of Woodhouselee, or where Earlshaugh looked down on the pastoral expanse near Leuchars and Balmullo, in the East Neuk of Fife.

When the time came that Roland had inexorably to go forth into the world and join his regiment, poor Hester Maule wept in secret as if her heart would have burst; while he—with all a boy's ardour for his red coat and the new and brilliant life before him—bade her farewell with provoking equanimity and wonderful philosophy; and now that he had come back, and she—in the dignity of her eighteen years—could no longer aid him in birdnesting (if he thought of such a thing), or holding a wicket for him, she had—during the few weeks he had been at home—felt her girl's heart go back to the sweet old days and the starting-point, which he seemed to have almost forgotten, or scarcely referred to.

And yet, when she came along the grassy bank, and tossed her garden hat aside on seating herself on the grass near him, there was something in her bearing then which haunted him in after-years—a shy, unconscious grace in all her movements, a flush on her soft cheek, a bright expression in her clear and innocent eyes, brightened apparently by the flickering shadows that fell between the leaves upon her uncovered head, and flushed her white summer

dress with touches of bright colour; and looking at him archly, she began, as if almost to herself, to sing a song she had been wont to sing long ago—an old song to the older air of the 'Bonnie Briar Bush':

'The visions of the buried past
Come thronging, dearer far
Than joys the present hour can give,
Than present objects are——'

'Go on, Hester,' said Roland, as she paused.

'No,' said she with a little *moue*, 'you don't care for these old memories now.'

'When soldiering, Hester, we have to keep our minds so much in the present that, by Jove! a fellow has not much time for brooding over the past.'

Hester made no reply, but cast down her lashes, and proceeded to roll and unroll the ribbons of her hat round her slender fingers.

Roland Lindsay manipulated another cigar, lit it leisurely, and relapsed into silence too.

He was a remarkably good-looking young fellow, and perhaps one who knew himself to be so, having been somewhat spoiled by ladies already. Though not quite regular, his features were striking, and—like his bearing—impressed those who did not know him well with a high opinion of his strength of character, which was not great, we must admit, in some respects; though his chin was well defined and even square, as shown by his being closely shaven all save a carefully trimmed dark moustache.

His grayish hazel eyes looked almost black at night, and were expressive and keen yet soft. In figure he was well set up—the drill-sergeant had done that; and unmistakably he was a manly-looking fellow in his twenty-seventh year, dressed in a plain yet irreproachably-made tweed suit of light gray that well became his dark and dusky complexion, with spotlessly white cuffs and tie, and a tweed stalking-cap peaked before and behind. He had an air of well-bred nonchalance, of being perfectly at home; and now you have him—Captain Roland Lindsay of Her Majesty's Infantry, with a face and neck burned red and blistered by the fierce sun of Egypt and the Soudan.

Merlwood, the house of Hester's father, which he was now favouring with a protracted visit, is situated on the north bank of the Esk, and was so named as being the favourite haunt of the blackbird, whose voice was heard amid its thickets in the earliest spring, as that of the throstle was heard not far off in the adjacent birks of Mavis-wood on the opposite side of that river, which, from its source in the hills of Peebles till it joins the sea at Musselburgh, displays sylvan beauties of which no other stream in Scotland can boast—the beauties of which Scott sang so skilfully in one of his best ballads:

'Sweet are the paths, O, passing sweet!
By Esk's fair streams that run
O'er airy steep, through copsewood deep,
Impervious to the sun,

'From that fair dome where suit is paid,
By blast of bugle free,
To Auchindinny's hazel shade,
And haunted Woodhouselee,

'Who knows not Melville's beechy grove
And Roslin's rocky glen,
Dalkeith, which all the virtues love,
And classic Hawthornden?

Embosomed amid the beautiful scenery here, the handsome modern villa of Merlwood, with its Swiss roof and plate-glass oriel windows half smothered amid wild roses, clematis, and jasmine, crowned a bank where the dreamy and ceaseless murmur of the Esk was ever heard; and in the cosy if not stately rooms of which old Sir Harry Maule, K.C.B., a retired Lieutenant-General, and the veteran of more than one Indian war, had stored up the mementoes of his stirring past—the tusky skulls, striped skins, and giant claws of more than one man-eating tiger, trophies of his breechloader; and those of other Indian conflicts at Lucknow, Jhansi, and elsewhere, in the shape of buffalo shields, tulwars, inlaid Afghan juzails, battle axes, and deadly khandjurs, with gorgeous trappings for horse and elephant.

And picturesque looked the home of the old soldier and his only daughter Hester, as seen in the August sunshine, at that season when autumn peeps stealthily through the openings made in thicket and hedge, when the sweet may-buds are dead and gone, the feathered grasses are cut down, but the ferns and the ivy yet cover all the rocks of the Esk, and flowering creepers connect the trees; the blue hare-bell still peeped out, and in waste places the ox-eye daisy and the light scarlet poppy were lingering still, for August is a month flushed with the last touches of summer, and though the latter was past and gone, those warm tints which make the Scottish woods so peculiarly lovely in autumn had not yet begun to mellow or temper the varied greenery of the bosky valley

of rocks and timber through which the mountain Esk flows to the Firth of Forth.

To the eyes of Roland Lindsay, how still and green and cool it all seemed, after the arid sands, the breathless atmosphere, and the scorching heat of Southern Egypt!

'By Jove, there is no place like home!' thought he, and he tossed out of his hammock *Punch*, the *Graphic*, and Clery's 'Minor Tactics,' with which he had been killing time, till his fair cousin joined him; and with his cigar alight, his stalking cap tilted forward over his eyes, his hands behind his head, he swung to and fro in the full enjoyment of lazy indolence.

CHAPTER II. HESTER MAULE.

Though the life of Hester Maule at Merlwood was a somewhat secluded one, as she had no mother to act as chaperone, it was not one of inaction. Her mornings were generally spent in charitable work among poor people in the nearest village, visiting the old and sick, sometimes in scolding and teaching the young, assisting the minister in many ways with local charities, and often winding up the evening by a brisk game of lawn-tennis with his young folks at the manse, and now and then a ball or a carpet dance at some adjacent house, when late hours never prevented her from being down from her room in the morning, as gay as a mavis or merle, to pour out her father's coffee, cut and air his paper, or attend to his hookah, the use of which the old Anglo-Indian had not yet been able to relinquish.

Now the girl had become shy or dry in manner, piqued and silent certainly, to her cousin; for, in mortifying contrast to her silent thoughts, she was pondering over his off-hand speech with which the preceding chapter opens; thus even he found it somewhat difficult to carry on a one-sided conversation with the back of her averted head, however handsome, with its large coil of dark and glossy hair turned to him.

Roland liked and more than admired his graceful cousin, and now, perhaps suspecting that his nonchalant manner was scarcely 'the thing' and finding her silent, even frosty in manner, he said:

'Hester, will you listen to me now?'

'That depends upon what you have to say, Roland.'

'I never say anything wrong, so don't be cross, my dear little one.'

'He treats me as a child still!' she thought in anger, and said sharply:

'Well?'

'Shall we go along the river bank and see the trout rising?'

'Why?'

'Well—it is certainly better than doing nothing.'

'But is useless,' said she coldly.

'Why? It is now my turn to ask.'

'Because you know very well, or ought to know, that there are none to be seen after June, and that the mills have ruined angling hereabout.'

'Let us look for ferns, then—there are forty different kinds, I believe, in Roslin Glen.'

'Ferns—how can you be so childish, Roland!' exclaimed the girl with growing pique, as she thought—'If he has aught to say of more interest, surely he can say it here,' and she kept her eyes averted, looking down the wooded glen through which the river brawled, with her heart full of affection and love, which her cousin was singularly slow to see; then furtively she looked at him once or twice, as he lounged on his back, smoking and gazing upward at

the patches of blue sky seen through the interlaced branches of the overarching trees.

'Gentleman' was stamped on every feature and in every action of Lindsay, and there was an easy and quiet deliberation in all he did and said that indicated good breeding, and yet he had a bearing in his figure and aspect in his dark face that would have become Millais' 'Black Brunswicker.'

Hester Maule is difficult to describe; but if the reader will think of the prettiest girl she or he ever saw, they have a general idea of her attractions.

A proud and stately yet most graceful-looking girl, Hester had a lissom figure a trifle over the middle height, hair of the richest and deepest brown, dark violet-coloured and velvety-like eyes with full lids, long lashes, and brows that were black; a dazzling complexion, a beautiful smile when pleased, and hands and feet that showed race and breeding beyond all doubt.

Roland was quite aware that Hester was no longer a child, but a girl almost out of her teens, and one that looked older than her years. He had seen her at intervals, and seen how she had grown up and expanded into the handsome girl she had become—one of whom any kinsman might be proud; and with all his seeming indifference and doubt of his true emotions, it was evident now that propinquity might do much; and times there were when he began to feel for her some of that tender interest and admiration which generally form a sure prelude to love. Moreover, they were cousins, and 'there is no denying that cousinship covers a multitude of things within its kindly mantle.'

Hester was the only daughter of his maternal uncle, the old General, whose services had won him a K.C.B.—an improvident and somewhat impoverished man, who for years had been a kind of invalid from ailments contracted after the great Indian Mutiny—chiefly from a bullet lodged in his body at Jhansi, when he fought under the famous Sir Hugh Rose—Lord Strathnairn in later years.

She was the one 'ewe lamb' of his flock, all of whom were lying by their mother's side under the trees in the old kirkyard of Lasswade, within sound of the murmuring Esk; and though the charm of Hester's society had been one of the chief reasons that induced Roland Lindsay to linger at Merlwood, as he had done for nearly a month past, he was loth to adopt the idea now being involved therein. Such is the inconsistency of the male heart at times; and he, perhaps, misconstrued, or attributed his emotion to compassion for her apparently lonely life and somewhat dubious future—for Sir Henry's life was precarious; and in this perilous and dubious state matters were now, while Roland's leave of absence was running on.

Not that the latter was extremely limited. To the uninitiated we may mention that what is technically termed winter leave extends generally from the 15th October to the 14th of the following March, 'when all officers are to be present with their respective regiments and depôts;' but Roland had extended or more ample leave accorded him than this, owing to the sufferings he had undergone from a wound and fever when with the army of occupation in Egypt, a portion of which his regiment formed—hence it was that August saw him at Merlwood.

And now we may briefly state how he was situated, and some of the 'features' on which his future 'hinged.'

During his absence with the army his father, the old fox-hunting Laird of Earlshaugh, a widower, after the death of Roland's mother had rashly married her companion, a handsome but artful woman, who, at his death (caused by a fall in the hunting-field, after which she had nursed him assiduously), was left by him, through his will, all that he possessed in land, estate, and heritage, without control; but never doubting—poor silly man—that she would do full justice in the end to his only son and daughter, as a species of mother, mistress, and guardian—a risk the eventualities of which he had not quite foreseen, as we shall show in the time to come.

But so it was; his father, who, at one time, he thought, would hardly have rested in his grave if the acres of Earlshaugh and the turrets of the old mansion had gone out of the family, in which they had been since Sir James Lindsay of Edzell and Glenesk fell by his royal master's side at Flodden, had been weak enough to do this monstrous piece of injustice, under the influence of an artful and designing woman!

It was an injury so galling, so miserable, and—to Roland Lindsay—so scarcely realizable, that he had been in no haste to return to his ancestral home.

And hence, perhaps, he had lingered at Merlwood, where his uncle, Sir Harry, who hated, defied, and utterly failed to understand anything of the 'outs and ins' of law or lawyers, including wills and bequests, etc., etc., fed his natural indignation by anathematizing the artful Jezebel of a step-mother; and declaring that he never did and never would believe in her; and adjusting himself as well as that cursed 'Jhansi bullet' would allow him, while lounging back in his long, low, and spacious Singapore

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

