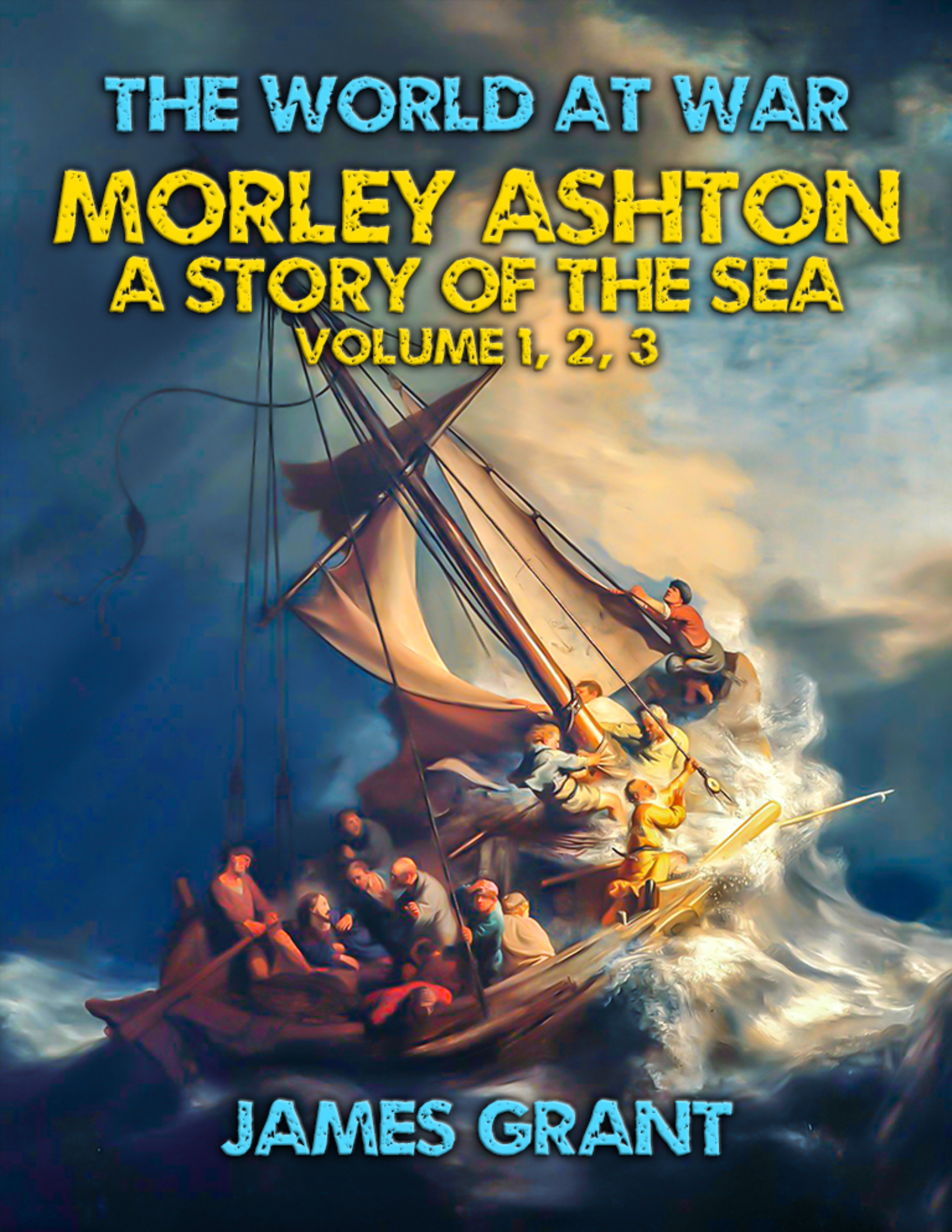
THE WORLD AT WAR

MORLEY ASHTON

A STORY OF THE SEA

VOLUME 1, 2, 3



JAMES GRANT

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Volume 1, 2, 3

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Volume 1

CHAPTER I.
THE BLIND GODDESS.

It was the evening of one of the last days of spring, when that delightful season is blending with the approaching summer, and when the sun was setting on one of those green and fertile landscapes which we find nowhere but in England, that a young man paused upon the crest of the eminence which overlooks, from the southward, the beautiful little vale and sequestered village of Acton-Rennel, and, with a kindling eye and flushing cheek, surveyed the scene and all its features, on which he had not gazed for what now seemed a long and weary lapse of time.

Morley Ashton—for it was he whom we introduce at once to the reader—was a handsome and active young fellow, with a lithe and well-knit figure, somewhat above the middle height; but he was thin and rather sallow in face, as if wasted by recent sickness or suffering.

His short-shorn hair and well-pointed moustache, together with the general contour of his head, suggested the idea of a soldier, and yet no soldier was he.

Forethought and penetration were perceptible in the form and lines of his brow; his keen, bright, but contemplative eyes, and the shape of his lower jaw, betokened firmness, decision, and courage; and well did Morley Ashton require them all, for these pages, and the course of our story, which opens at no remote date, but only a very short time ago, will show that he had a very desperate game to play.

Tanned by warmer suns than those which shine in his native England, his complexion was dark, and, at times, there was a keen, bold restlessness in his eyes, which seemed to indicate that he had seen many a far and foreign shore, and many a danger too, since last he stood by the old Norman cross on Cherrywood Hill, and looked on the vale and village of Acton-Rennel.

In Morley's dress—a stout grey tweed suit—there was nothing remarkable; but a large and well-worn courier-bag, slung by a broad strap across his right shoulder, seemed to indicate that he was travelling, and dust covered his boots; yet he had only walked some four miles or so from the nearest station on the London and North-Western line.

As he looked upon the landscape, where the cowslips were spotting the meadows; where the wild rose was blooming, and the yellow gorse was flowering by the hedgerows; where the cherry and apple trees were in full blossom by the wayside; the landscape, so rich in its foliage and greenery; so calm in aspect, with the square tower of its Norman church, stunted in form and massed with ivy, darkly defined against the flush of the western sky; the little parsonage, secluded among plum and apple trees, over which its clustered chimneys and quaint old gables peeped; the thatched village, buried amid coppice, wild hops, wild flowers, and ivy; the fertile uplands, where the wavy corn would soon be yellowing under the genial summer sun; and, stretching in the distance far away, the wooded chase, the remains of a great Saxon forest, whence comes the name of our village, Æctune, or Oaktown-Rennel, whose leafy dingles have echoed many a time to the horn of William Rufus, ere he fell by Tyrrel's arrow; the landscape, where the voice of the cuckoo rose at times from the woodlands, with the occasional lowing of the full-fed herd, winding homeward "slowly o'er the lea." As he gazed on all

this, we say, a sigh of pleasure escaped from Morley Ashton, for it was long since he had beheld such a scene, or one that had so much of England and of home in all its placid features.

Save a glimpse of the distant ocean, rippling and shining in the sunset, through a rocky opening or chasm, known as Acton Chine—terrible in the annals of wreckers and smugglers—the landscape might have seemed in the very heart of England; but on the ocean, "our water-girdle," Morley turned his back, for of late he had tasted quite enough of spray and spoondrift, having just landed in the Mersey, after a long and perilous voyage.

He passed the old church with its deep grey buttresses, and older yew trees; its picturesque Lykegate, footstile, and gravelled path, that wound between the grassy mounds and lettered stones; he passed the village, with its alehouse and well-remembered sign-board; and then he struck into the long green lane that lies beyond—the lane in which Dick Turpin robbed the rector.

All was very calm and still.

The merry voices of some little roisterers, who swung with frantic glee upon a paddock gate, soon died away in the distance; the wheel of the rustic mill had ceased to turn, and the water flowed unchafed along its narrow race; even the hum of the honey bee had died away, as it had gone laden to its home, and soft and almost holy thoughts would have stolen into Morley's heart, at such a time and place and sober sunset, but for the keen anxiety that made him hasten on—the anxiety that love and long absence had created, and verses that he had somewhere read occurred to him with painful truth:—

"Ah! not as once!—my spirit now
    Is shadowed by a dull cold fear,
Nor Spring's soft breath that fans my brow
    Nor Spring's sweet flowers my breast can cheer.

"Oh, Spring! sweet Spring! if Heaven decree
    My term of life to be so brief,
That joy I would afar but see,
    But taste the bitter cup of grief."

While proceeding, he looked frequently and eagerly around him; for now every old gnarled beech that overhung the path, and every meadow gate brought back some stirring thought or tender memory.

The flush in the western sky was bright, so he shaded his eyes with his hand (though whilom accustomed to more cloudless skies and brighter suns than ours), as if looking for some expected person.

At last an irrepressible exclamation of joy escaped him, as a hat and feather, and a female figure there was no mistaking, met his eye.

He flourished his wide-awake hat, and then quickened his pace, as a little parasol was waved in reply.

In a minute more his arms were around a young girl, who rushed forward, panting and breathless, to meet him, and his lips were pressed to hers in a long and silent kiss.

"Ethel, my own, own Ethel, at last—at *last*!" he exclaimed, in a voice rendered tremulous by excess of emotion; but the young girl for some time was unable to reply. She could but sob upon his breast in the fulness of her joy.

There was a long and tender pause, during which their lips, though silent, were busy enough, perhaps, for "Love," says some one, "is a sting of joy, but a heartache for ever!"

"I knew, dear Ethel, that you would come to meet me," said Morley, "if my letter arrived in time to inform you of the train by which I would leave Liverpool."

"Where you landed last night—only last night—and this evening you are here," she exclaimed.

"Yes, Ethel; but poorer than when I left England," said the young man sadly; "poorer than when I left you," he replied, drawing her arm through his, but still retaining her hand, with both of his folded over it;—"and now tell me how are all at Laurel Lodge. Your papa——"

"Is quite well."

"And your sister Rose—merry little Rose?"

"Well, blooming, and lively as ever."

"Why did she not come to meet me too? My letters have told you, Ethel, that after enduring the misery of three years' exile on the Bonny River, wearily waiting and toiling, transacting the sale of camwood, ivory, and palm oil, for my owners in Liverpool, and often enduring the frightful fever of that pestilent place——"

"Ah, my poor dear Morley, how it has thinned and wasted you!" said Ethel, looking at him tenderly through her tears.

"I have been compelled to return, almost broken in health, and what is worse, perhaps, in a worldly sense, well-nigh penniless, Ethel, to look for other work at home. But tell me something of yourself, dearest!"

"What can I say?—what can I tell you, Morley, for here, at Laurel Lodge, each day that passes is so like its predecessor?"

"How will Mr. Basset—how will your father, welcome me?" asked Morley, anxiously.

"Most kindly, Morley."

"You think so, still," continued the young man.

"Yes. All the more kindly that you have not been favoured by fortune; papa is most generous," replied Ethel.

Morley did not feel quite persuaded of this, but replied:

"Bless him and you for this assurance, darling. Oh, Ethel, how charming your sweet English face seems to me! Do you know, dearest, that for three whole years I have never seen a white woman or a red cheek? But you have not told me about Rose—no husband yet?"

"She has lovers in plenty, and Jack Page is her adorer," said Ethel smiling; "but there is enough time for Rose to think of marrying. Besides——" but Miss Basset paused and sighed.

"True; she is two years younger than you, Ethel. But our marriage, my love, seems far, far off indeed. Oh, farther than ever! Your father——"

"Will welcome you warmly, of that be assured, but——"

"But what, Ethel? Something weighs upon your mind."

"Many misfortunes have come upon him, misfortunes which we could never have foreseen."

"In your two last letters, you hinted something of losses in London speculations."

"Yes; and consequently, he has come to the resolution of leaving Acton-Rennel—leaving dear Laurel Lodge, where since childhood we have been so happy."

"Leaving Laurel Lodge!" exclaimed Ashton.

"Leaving England itself, Morley," said Ethel, as her fine eyes became suffused with tears again.

"England!" repeated Morley Ashton, breathlessly, and growing very pale indeed.

"Yes; did you not get my letter, in which I told you that papa had been appointed to a vacant judgeship in the Isle of France, and that in two months or less from this time we shall sail for that distant colony?"

"No—no! I hear all this now for the first time."

"Papa will tell you all about it," continued Ethel, weeping on her lover's shoulder. "He has been appointed one of the three judges in the supreme civil and criminal court of the island."

"Oh, what fatality is this!" exclaimed Morley Ashton, mournfully, as he struck his hands together; "have I returned to England, but to be more than ever an exile, and to learn that you are going where you must school yourself to forget me?"

"Oh, do not say so, Morley!" implored Miss Basset.

"All is ended now," replied her lover; "on earth there is nothing more for me."

"Or *me*!" said Ethel, upbraidingly.

"True; in the selfishness of my own love and grief, I forget yours."

The girl's tears fell fast, and he held her locked to his breast; for there was no eye on them in that sequestered lane, where the evening star, sparkling like a diamond set in amber, alone looked on them.

After a pause:

"See, Morley," said the girl, with a lovely smile, as she drew her ribbon from her bosom; "our split sixpence!"

"Here is the other half, dear Ethel. I used to carry it at my watch-guard, but seals and charms are dangerous gear among the black fellows of the Bonny River, who want every trinket they see, so I thought it safer where your lock of hair lay—next my heart. It was a happy hour in which you gave me that dear lock, my sweet Ethel."

"It was on an evening in summer, when we sat yonder by the old stile at the churchyard. How often have I wished to live that hour over again!" sighed his companion.

"And, sweet one, so we shall in reality, as I have often done in my day-dreams, when far, far away from this dear home and you; but this approaching separation crushes the heart within me, and destroys all hope for the future."

"Take courage, Morley, though I have none," said the young girl, while still her tears fell fast.

Ah me! a split sixpence is of small value, yet here it was riches, for it embodied the hopes, the future, and was all the world to two young and loving hearts!

"Amid the pestilent swamps and mangrove creeks of West Africa, where, from September to June, the steamy malaria rises like smoke in the sunshine, baleful," said Morley, "and laden with disease and death, O Ethel, my thoughts were with you! There, while engaged in the stupid and monotonous task of daily bartering old muskets, nails, and buttons, powder, rum, and tobacco, for palm-oil, camwood, ivory, lion-skins, and gorgeous feathers, bartering, cajoling, and often browbeating the hideous and barbarous savages of Eboe and Biafra, for our house in Liverpool, the hope of being reunited to you alone sustained and inspired me. In my wretched hut, built of stakes, roofed with palm-leaves, and plastered with mud, or on board the river craft, where we always sleep at some seasons, and during the horrors of the fever which left me the wreck of myself, it was your memory alone that shed light and hope around me. And there was one terrible night, when the breathless air was still and heavy, and when a green slime covered all the ripples of the rotten sea, while my pulse was as fleet as lightning, and my brain was burning, and when I thought that certainly I must soon die, my old friend Bartelot—you have often heard me speak of Tom Bartelot, of Liverpool—conveyed me to his brig, which rode at her moorings inside Foche Point, and he actually cured me, merely by talking for hours of you, Ethel, and of our meeting again—cured me, when, perhaps, the doctor's doses failed. And now, Ethel, poor though I am, broken in spirit, and crushed in hope—this hour, this moment, and these kisses, dearest, reward me for all, all—toil, danger, suffering, and hoping against hope itself!"

As he spoke he pressed Ethel Basset again to his breast in a long and passionate embrace, and a bright, happy, and lovely smile spread over the face of the young girl.

CHAPTER II.
LAUREL LODGE.

To a certain extent the conversation in the preceding chapter must have served to inform the reader of the relative positions and prospects of those whom, without much preamble, we have introduced—to wit, the hero and heroine of our story.

Morley Ashton was the only son of a once wealthy merchant, whose failure and death had left him well-nigh penniless, to push his fortune in the world as he best could. Thus, as agent of a Liverpool house, he had been, as he stated, broiling for the last three years on the western coast of Africa, with what success the reader has learned from his conversation with Ethel Basset, to whom he had now been engaged for four years.

Ethel was now somewhere about her twentieth year, and though her face was not, perhaps, of that kind which is termed strictly beautiful, it would be difficult to say wherein a defect could be traced.

Her features were regular, and, though somewhat pensive in expression, her occasionally sparkling and piquant smile relieved them from that insipidity which frequently is the characteristic of a perfectly regular face.

Though, in addition to singing, riding, and waltzing to perfection, she could play rather a good stroke at billiards, and make a good shot at the archery butts, her manner was gentle and graceful, her mind intelligent, and she improved on acquaintance, for few could converse with Ethel Basset for half-an-hour without being somehow convinced that she was lovely.

Her taste in dress was excellent, and one felt that from her little gloved hand, or, rather, from her smoothly-braided hair to the little heels of her kid boots, Ethel was a study.

Her mother's death had early inducted her into the cares and mystery of housekeeping, and made her thoughtful, perhaps, beyond her years.

Mr. Scriven Basset, her father, was a kind and warm-hearted, but somewhat easy-tempered man. In early life he had practised successfully as a barrister in London, where he had contracted a wealthy marriage. After this event he had retired to Acton-Rennel, and there, for the last eighteen years or so, his life had passed quietly and happily.

His tastes were elegant, but expensive; thus his villa of Laurel Lodge was fitted up in a style of no ordinary splendour, and to part with the elegancies by which he was surrounded would cost some pangs when the time came.

Since a pecuniary change had come upon his affairs, and as he had procured, by the friendship of the M.P. for Acton-Rennel, a legal colonial appointment, all his household goods must be scattered. He knew this, and that there was no help for it: save his dead wife's portrait, and a few equally dear "lares," all must "come to the hammer," as he phrased it, when he and his two girls sailed for their new home in the tropics.

He knew that poor Morley Ashton and his daughter, Ethel, had loved each other in early youth, when the prospects of the former were fair, and his "expectations" unexceptionable; and, though reverses came which blasted these, and rendered a marriage unadvisable, strange to say he did not separate them.

This was but a part of his easy disposition, and he permitted them to correspond, in the hope that, by absence, their mutual regard would gradually die away, as the mere fancy of a boy and girl.

But fortune ordained it otherwise.

Had Morley come home with wealth (three years on the Bonny River will scarcely serve to acquire that), he could have had no objections to their marriage; but there would be many now that Morley had come home poor.

Mr. Basset knew, moreover, that Morley, as his last letter had informed Ethel, was to visit them at Laurel Lodge immediately on his return.

"Well, well," thought the easy Mr. Basset, "a few weeks will separate them hopelessly now, so the poor young folks may as well be left to bill and coo together in peace until we sail for the Mauritius, which will be three times as far off as the Bonny River."

This policy was dangerous, and somewhat questionable; but we shall see how it ended.

Proceeding slowly hand in hand, and while such thoughts as these passed through the mind of papa, who, reclining in his easy-chair, was still lingering over his wine and walnuts, watching dreamily the last flush of the sun, that shone down the dingles of Acton Chase, Morley and Miss Basset reached the end of the green lane, where a handsome white gate closed the avenue that led to Laurel Lodge.

It was long and shady; a double row of giant laurels, from which the villa had its name, bordered the approach, and over these rose some venerable sycamores, in which the lazy rooks were croaking and cawing.

Laurel Lodge was a house of irregular proportions, the oldest part having been built in the middle of the seventeenth century, had small latticed windows, with carved mullions of red sandstone. The modern additions had been built by Mr. Basset, and were lofty and elegant, with large windows, some of which opened to the gravelled walks of the garden.

There was a handsome Elizabethan porch, surmounted, as some thought, rather ostentatiously by the Basset arms, a shield having three bars wavy, supported by two unicorns, armed and collared; and the pillars and arch of this porch, like the roof and clustered chimneys of the older part of the edifice, were covered with masses of dark ivy, fragrant honeysuckle, clematis, and brilliant scarlet-runners.

Through the vestibule beyond, with its tesselated floor and walls, covered with fishing, riding, and shooting appurtenances—rods, nets, boots, whips, guns, and shot-belts—Ethel led Morley to the door of the well-remembered dining-room, where, as we have said, Mr. Basset was still lingering in the twilight, over his full-bodied old port.

Though every feature of this comfortable English villa was known of old to Morley, after his three years' residence in a wigwam on the banks of the Bonny River, its aspect impressed him deeply now, and his eyes wandered rapidly over the furniture of carved walnut and marqueterie, inlaid with representations of game and fruit, the crimson velvet chairs, and old Rembrandt tables of quaint and beautiful designs, the buhl clock on the rich marble mantel-piece, the gorgeous vases of Sèvres and Dresden china, the ivory puzzles and Burmese idols, of which he had glimpses between the parted silk and damask curtains of the drawing-room windows.

Then there were the Brussels carpets, the grates that glittered like polished silver, the black wolf and dun deer skins, and the eight-light chandeliers of crystal and Venetian bronze, with armour, pictures, statuary, and rare books in gorgeous bindings—in short, the tout-ensemble of Laurel Lodge, wherein taste, wealth, luxury, and comfort, were all so rarely and singularly combined, formed to the mind of poor Morley a powerful contrast to the cabin of Tom Bartelot's 200-ton brig, and to the before-mentioned wigwam, with its roof of palm-leaves and trellised walls of reeds and bamboo cane, through which the mosquitoes and the malaria came together by night.

"It is Morley, papa," said Ethel, as they entered; "he has come by the very train we expected, and has walked all the way from Acton station."

"The express from Liverpool; but, ah, my dear sir, it was not even quick enough for me. I would have come by telegraph if I could," said the young man, as Mr. Basset shook him warmly by the hand.

"Welcome back to England! welcome home, Morley!" said he. "Sit beside me, lad, and let me see how you look! Ring for wine and more glasses, Ethel. And so, after all your toil and danger, worldly matters have not prospered with you, eh?"

"No, sir," sighed the young man, with his eyes fixed tenderly on Ethel, who had flung her hat and parasol on the sofa, and seated herself beside him; "I have come back to England a poorer fellow than when I left it."

"I am deeply sorry for that, Morley—port or cherry? Under the sideboard are some Marcobrunner, Johannisberg, and Sauterne, too, I think—port you prefer?

—then the bottle stands with you. Sorry for your sake, and the sake of others, to hear what you say."

As he spoke he did not glance at Ethel, who was filling Morley's glass; so she sighed and trembled, for it seemed, by his tone and manner, as if he still acknowledged the fact of her engagement with Morley Ashton, but considered it all at an end now.

"Matters have not prospered with me, either," said Mr. Basset, who was a healthy and florid-looking man, nearer fifty than forty, however, but with the dark hair already well seamed with grey; "quite the reverse," he continued, emphatically; "so that I cannot upbraid you with being on worse terms with fortune than myself. You have, of course, heard of all that has occurred?"

"Ethel has told me all," said Morley, sadly.

"Aye, fortune is fickle, and was well portrayed as blind, and as Shakspere has it:—

> "'Will fortune never come with both hands full,
> But write her fair words still in foulest letters?
> She either gives a stomach and no food,—
> Such are the poor in health; or else a feast,
> And takes away the stomach; such are the rich,
> That have abundance and enjoy it not."

"He can console himself with scraps from Shakspere, while my heart is bursting," thought Morley.

"And so Ethel has told you all?" resumed Mr. Basset, cracking another walnut of the fruit which had followed a luxurious dinner.

"Yes, sir, and in doing so has wrung the soul within me."

"Oh, Morley," said Ethel, placing her ungloved hand kindly upon his, "do not talk so mournfully."

"Aye, aye, lad," said Mr. Basset, thinking most of himself, as, with his head on one side, one eye closed, and the other admiring the ruby colour of his wine as it shone between him and the flushed sky, "at my age, though I am not very old, but have many settled habits, it is hard to leave one's native country, and to set out with these tender girls on a long, rough voyage; but needs must—you know the rest."

"And so Ethel and I meet again, only to be separated for ever," exclaimed Morley, while he pressed her hand within his own, and in a tone so mournful that Mr. Basset, who, like every matter-of-fact Englishman, hated scenes, as they worried him, fidgeted in his chair, and said to Ethel:

"Where is Rose? Has she not seen Mr. Ashton yet?"

"She is with the captain in the conservatory, I think."

Morley, who disliked the formality of being termed "Mr. Ashton," glanced at Ethel, and perceived that a blush was burning on her cheek.

"You did not tell me that you had a visitor," said he.

"We had matters of greater moment to think of, Morley, had we not?" asked Ethel, anxiously.

"Besides, the captain is rather more than a visitor," observed Mr. Basset, laughing.

"More?" said Ashton, with a sickly smile.

"He has spent some few weeks with us," said Ethel.

"Weeks, Ethel?" exclaimed Mr. Basset. "Why, girl, they have run to months now. He is the son of one of my oldest and dearest friends—old Tom Hawkshaw, of Lincoln's Inn—and has seen a great deal of the world. He is a fine, free, rattling fellow, whom I am sure you will like; at least, I hope so, as he proposes to follow, perhaps to go with, us to the Mauritius."

Morley felt his heart sink, he knew not why, at these words—or at what they imported.

"Has there been a game playing here of which I have been kept in ignorance?" thought he.

There was an instinctive fear or jealousy in his mind, and he dared scarcely to look at Ethel. When he did so, there was a painful blush upon her cheek.

"Do not speak of the Mauritius, my dear sir," said he, in an agitated tone. "I cannot conceive or realise the idea of your all being anywhere but here—here at dear old Laurel Lodge."

"Never mind—time soothes all things. Fill your glass, Morley. The Mauritius possesses a splendid climate, though it is rather hot from November to April; and there the best of wine can be had almost duty free. Once we are there, who can say, but I may find you a snug appointment, my boy, and Ethel shall write to acquaint you of it."

Now Mr. Basset had in reality no more idea at that moment of procuring any such post for Morley, than of securing one for the personage who resides in the moon, but it suited him to say so at the time; and thus Morley, with a heart full of gratitude, exclaimed:

"Ah, how, sir! how shall I thank you?"

"By working hard and industriously at home in the meantime; by never shrinking from trouble, nor fearing aught that is onerous."

"Such, sir, has ever been my maxim and habit—yet what have they availed me?"

"With your business habits, your father's well-known name and connections in Liverpool, your intimate acquaintance with the west coast trade of Africa, you cannot be at a loss to push your way until you might join us. My friend the captain, as I have said, perhaps goes with us. Has Ethel told you that I am pledged to do something for him? But Heaven alone knows what will suit him; he is such an unsettled dog, and has been so long accustomed to wandering ways in California, and among scalp-hunters in Texas, the Rocky Mountains, and everywhere else."

All this sounded ill and unwelcome to Morley, and served to disturb him greatly.

His sallow cheek, long blanched by past illness, burned redly; his eyes were hot and sad in expression. As he drank another glass of port, he felt the crystal rattling on his teeth, and as Ethel watched him anxiously, her little hand stole lovingly into his, which closed tightly upon it.

He perceived that she had still his engagement ring on the proper finger, but another ring—a huge nugget-like affair, with a green stone—was there too!

CHAPTER III.
CRAMPLY HAWKSHAW.

Before Morley had time to think or inquire—if, indeed, inquiry was necessary—concerning this trinket, a lovely, laughing girl of eighteen burst into the room, and kissed him playfully on each cheek.

"Rose," he exclaimed, "Rose, how you have grown. The little girl I left behind has become quite a woman!"

"Why have you delayed so long, Rose?" said Ethel, almost with annoyance. "Did you not know who was here—that Morley had arrived?"

"No. If so, do you think I would have delayed?"

"Yet you have done so."

"Oh, don't be jealous," replied Rose, laughing, though her answer unwittingly galled Morley, and annoyed Ethel more; "we were not flirting, for the captain was only telling me about the flowers of South America; and I merely amuse myself with him and Jack Page, when I can get no one else."

Morley thought of the strange ring on Ethel's finger, and as he caressed Rose's hand, there arose some unpleasant forebodings in his mind; but at that moment, as lights were brought, and tea announced in the drawing-room, the gentleman whom they styled "captain" entered from the conservatory, throwing back therein the fag-end of his cigar.

Ethel hastened to introduce him to Morley as "Captain Cramply Hawkshaw, the son of papa's old and valued friend."

The captain bowed coldly to Morley, whom he scrutinised from head to foot in a cool and rather supercilious manner.

Hawkshaw was rather under than over the middle height, and possessed a tough and well-knit figure. He had rather a good air and bearing; but at times his manner was absurd and swaggering, and his features, though good and well cut, were decidedly sinister—so much so, that his eyes had in them, occasionally, an expression, which, to a keen observer, was most forbidding.

Under his light grey sack coat, he wore no waistcoat, but had his trousers girt by a Spanish sash; a tasselled smoking-cap, like an Egyptian tarboosh, was placed jauntily on his thick mass of curly dark hair. He rejoiced in a luxuriant beard and pair of long whiskers, with which his moustaches mingled.

He interlarded his conversation somewhat profusely with digger terms, Spanish oaths, and Yankee military phrases, American interjections, and frequent allusions to bowie-knives and six-shooters, and a pair of these weapons always figured on his dressing-table.

In fact, the captain seemed a character, though scarcely worth studying; but one that must frequently appear, more for evil than for good, in these pages.

At a glance, Morley perceived that he was somewhat of a swaggering fool—perhaps worse. He conceived an instinctive aversion for him—an aversion, however, that seemed to be quite mutual—and he marvelled by what idiosyncracy of his nature Mr. Basset could tolerate, or propose to patronise, a guest whose bearing was so questionable, and whose presence was rendered so obnoxious to himself, by his too-evident partiality for Ethel.

Nor was this emotion lessened when our hero perceived, that whenever he spoke, a covert sneer stole into the cunning eyes of the captain.

He had been an officer, it appeared, among the Texans, in the Partizan Rangers, or some such distinguished corps; and like Gibbet, in the "Beau's Stratagem," he considered "captain" a good travelling name, and one that kept waiters, grooms, and even railway porters in order; so he still adhered to his regimental rank in the Partizan Rangers, or true-blooded Six-shooters of Texas.

He talked of scalping Red Indians, and shooting Spanish picaroons, as if such were his daily amusement; and when smoking out of doors, would squat on the grass in the mode peculiar to the Texan troopers, among whom he had undoubtedly become a deadly shot, and a good horseman—the only qualities he possessed.

"Papa," said Rose, while Ethel was officiating at the tea-urn, "I wish you to scold Captain Hawkshaw——"

"Why, what has he done now?—been burning your dog's nose with his cigar—smoking it in the drawing-room, or what?"

"He has been laughing at our loveliest azaleas, and saying they were only weeds."

"In Tennessee, my dear Miss Rose, in Tennessee," said the captain, with a deprecating grimace, while caressing his long whiskers; "but your namesake, the rose itself, is perhaps deemed little better than a weed in some countries."

"Where you have been?" inquired Morley.

"But," continued Hawkshaw, without deigning to hear his question, "to me—one who has seen the luscious fruit and gorgeous flower-covered districts of Xalappa, and of Chilpansingo, in the *tierras tiempladas* of Mexico—there is nothing you can show in this tame England of yours that interests you."

"Ours," retorted Rose; "is it not yours too?"

"Nay, nay," said the captain, shaking his head and the tassel of his tarboosh together, "I am a cosmopolitan."

"And care nothing for your country?" said Morley.

"*Caramba!* as we say in Texas, I did so once; but the sun shines brighter in other lands than it does in England."

"You will never make me think so, captain," said Mr. Basset, pushing aside his tea-cup; "for even now my heart sinks with deep depression at the thought of leaving home."

"'Tis nothing when you are used to it, sir—positively nothing. However, you have comfortable diggings here, and some very pretty fixings, too," observed the captain, casting his eyes on the mirrors, the hangings, and vases of Sèvres and Dresden china which decorated the drawing-room; "and thus, perhaps, don't care much about sailing in search of 'fresh fields and pastures new,' eh, squire?—or judge, I suppose we should call you?"

"No, I shall leave my heart behind me in England—in dear old Acton-Rennel. But the sooner we are gone the better; for every day now seems to bind me more to the place where my happiest years have been spent," said Mr. Basset, whose eyes grew moist as his heart filled with the memory of the wife whom he had lain in the grave but three years before, and with whom Morley Ashton had been

an especial favourite, for he was gentle and lovable, yet manly withal.

In her resting-place—under the old yew at Acton church—he felt that she was still near, and still his; but once away from England, the separation would seem complete indeed.

Half shaded and half lit by the drawing-room lights, Ethel's beauty seemed very striking. Tall and dark-eyed, there was something of great delicacy in her cast of features, over which, as we have said, a pensive shadow often rested; especially when her white eyelids and long, dark lashes were drooping.

She was a girl whose whole air and manner, expression of eye, and turn of thought, were the embodiment of refinement; thus the conversation and brusquerie of the digger captain were by no means suited to her taste.

On the other hand, Rose was somewhat of a brown-haired hoyden; very lovely in her bursts of wild joy and laughter; all smiles and rosy dimples, and full of waggish expressions, in which the quieter Ethel never indulged; so she rather enjoyed the fanfaronades of Hawkshaw, and mimicked some of his idioms and Spanish exclamations with great success.

Tea over, and the piano opened, Morley hung fondly over Ethel, who ran her white fingers over the notes of an old and favourite air, which they had often sung together; while the captain, with his feet planted apart on the rich hearthrug, was romancing, or to use his own phraseology, "bouncing away" about the Tierra Caliente the mighty sierras of New Mexico, and so forth, to Mr. Basset, whose eyes were fixed on the embers that glowed in the bright steel grate, and whose thoughts were elsewhere.

"Your visitor seems quite at home here—a privileged man, in fact," said Morley. "You did not tell me this at first, Ethel," he added, in a lower tone.

Ethel blushed, and replied:

"We have been so used to him that I quite forgot."

"So used—then he has been long here."

"Nearly three months."

"Three months ago, Ethel, I was lying in Tom Bartelot's cabin, off the Bonny River, in hourly expectation of death, and with little hope of being where I am to-night, by your side, dearest, and listening to that old air again. And he has been here three months?"

"Yes, ever since his return from California."

"Is he rich—this captain—what horse-marine corps is he captain of?" continued Morley in an angry whisper.

"Oh, Morley, hush! he is not rich, poor fellow!"

"Poor devil!" muttered Morley.

"But he has realised something; I know not what; though he asserts that he has come back to us poorer than when he went away."

"To us," replied Morley, with growing displeasure, which he strove in vain to conceal. "Who is he?"

"A second cousin, or something of that kind, to papa, and the son of his old friend, Mr. Thomas Hawkshaw, of Lincoln's-inn. But why all these questions?" asked Ethel, looking her lover fully and fondly in the face.

Morley Ashton did not reply, for he felt an instinctive doubt and hatred of Hawkshaw: emotions that rose within his breast he scarcely knew why or wherefore; but, as a Scottish poet has it:

"Men feel by instinct swift as light,
The presence of the foe,
Whom God has marked in after years
To strike the mortal blow!"

Hawkshaw, while talking apparently to Mr. Basset, had his keen and sinister eyes fixed on the couple at the piano. They seemed plainly enough to indicate similar emotions in his breast, and to say:

"You are one too many in my diggings, Mr. Ashton. *Poco e poco*, I must get rid of you, my fine fellow, at whatever risk or cost!"

CHAPTER IV.
RIVALRY.

For a few days after Morley's arrival, he felt almost happy—happy in the society of Ethel, though the time when she would have to quit Laurel Lodge and sail from England—a time of painful, and it bade fair to be most hopeless separation—hung like a black cloud on the horizon of their future, and, alas! that time was not far distant now.

In three days the air of his native England had begun to redden Morley's cheek, but his eyes were sad in expression, and his heart was at times oppressed by thoughts which even Ethel's smile failed to dispel.

We have said the season was spring, and the last days of April, the time of which Clare sang so sweetly in his "Shepherd's Calendar."

"With thee the swallow dares to come
And cool his sultry wing;
And urged to seek his yearly home,
Thy suns the martin bring.

"Oh, lovely month, be leisure mine,
Thy yearly mate to be.
Though May-day scenes may lighter shine,
Their birth belongs to thee."

All the old familiar places where Ethel and Morley had wandered hand in hand before, they revisited now together.

The old green lanes of the picturesque village of Acton-Rennel, which, with its quaint old tumble-down houses of white-washed brick, and the black oak beams that run

through their walls at every angle, its ivied porches and latticed windows, half hidden by wild roses and honeysuckles, is one of the prettiest in England, were wandered in again and again.

Then there was the ancient church, with its moss-covered Lyke-gate and sequestered graveyard; the stile near her mother's tomb, where they had plighted their troth, and split the sixpence which has already figured in our story; Acton Chine, a dreadful chasm in the cliffs which overhung the sea, where the brain grew giddy if the eye attempted to fathom its depth, where the sea-birds wheeled and screamed in mid-air, and where the boom of the breakers on the rocks below came faintly to the ear—all were visited again and again, and never were Morley and Ethel weary of rambling by the margin of glittering Acton Mere, where the snow-white swans "swim double, swan and shadow," or in Acton Chase, scheming and dreaming of a future all their own, when he would strive to rejoin her in the Mauritius, and fortune yet might smile upon them all. They were too young, too loving, and too ardent to be without such hopes and day-dreams, though more than once Morley Ashton said:

"Oh, Ethel, I thought the time had gone for ever when I could lose myself in a world of my own creating."

They spent hours together by Cherrywood Hill and the Norman cross, where, according to old tradition, a Crusader, lord of Acton-Rennel, when returning from Jerusalem, had died of joy at the sight of his English home; but no place loved they more than stately Acton Chase.

This is the remains of one of those grand old English forests, where the Norman kings were wont to hunt of old, and where the marks of King John have been found on

more than one of the old trees when cutting them down lately. The storms of a thousand years have scattered the heavy foliage of these old English oaks; but every summer their leaves are thick and heavy again, as in the days when the wild boars whetted their tusks upon their lower stems.

In long rows, trunk after trunk, gnarled and knotty, solemn, brown, and distorted, they stand within the chase, in distance stretching far away, all green with moss or grey with lichens, and with the long feathery fern, which shelters the timid deer, the fleet hare, and the brown rabbit; and where the golden pheasant lays her eggs, waving high around their venerable roots, some of which stretch far into the brooks and tarns, where the heron wades, and the wild duck swims.

In the centre of this chase stands one vast tree "the monarch of the wood," sturdy, old, and almost leafless now, for its trunk has been thunder-riven.

This is called the Shamble-oak, for thereon, when the lover of fair Rosamond came hither to hunt with the Norman lords of Acton-Rennel, they were wont to hang the slaughtered deer, ere it was roasted and washed down with Rhenish wine, in the old oak hall of Acton Manor, a ruin now, as Cromwell's cannon left it.

Every tree on which, Orlando-like, Morley had carved the name and initials of his mistress, was sought for again; every familiar spot was revisited, and Captain Hawkshaw found, to his rage and mortification, two emotions which he could not at all times skilfully conceal, that Morley was always with Ethel, while he was left to amuse Rose, who always teased or quizzed him, or with her companions, who seemed to dislike him, to play chess with Mr. Basset, to the