

THE CHILDREN OF THE NEW FOREST.

CHAPTER I.

THE circumstances which I am about to relate to my juvenile readers took place in the year 1647. By referring to the history of England of that date, they will find that King Charles the First, against whom the Commons of England had rebelled, after a civil war of nearly five years, had been defeated, and was confined as a prisoner at Hampton Court. The Cavaliers, or the party who fought for King Charles, had all been dispersed, and the Parliamentary army under the command of Cromwell were beginning to control the Commons.

It was in the month of November in this year that King Charles, accompanied by Sir John Berkely, Ashburnham, and Legg, made his escape from Hampton Court, and rode as fast as the horses could carry them towards that part of Hampshire which led to the New Forest. The King expected that his friends had provided a vessel in which he might escape to France; but in this he was disappointed. There was no vessel ready, and after riding for some time along the shore, he resolved to

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go to Titchfield, a seat belonging to the Earl of Southampton. After a long consultation with those who attended him, he yielded to their advice, which was, to trust to Colonel Hammond, who was governor of the Isle of Wight for the Parliament, but who was supposed to be friendly to the King. Whatever might be the feelings of commiseration of Colonel Hammond towards a king so unfortunately situated, he was firm in his duties towards his employers, and the consequence was, that King Charles found himself again a prisoner in Carisbrook Castle.

But we must now leave the King, and retrace history to the commencement of the civil war. A short distance from the town of Lymington, which is not far from Titchfield, where the King took shelter, but on the other side of the Southampton Water, and south of the New Forest, to which it adjoins, was a property called Arnwood, which belonged to a Cavalier of the name of Beverley. It was at that time a property of considerable value, being very extensive, and the park ornamented with valuable timber; for it abutted on the New Forest, and might have been supposed to have been a continuation of it. This Colonel Beverley, as we must call him, for he rose to that rank in the King's army, was a valued friend and companion of Prince Rupert's, and commanded several troops of cavalry. He was ever at his side in the brilliant charges made by this gallant prince, and at last fell in his arms at the battle of Naseby. Colonel Beverley had married into the family of the Villiers, and the issue of his marriage was two sons and two daughters; but his zeal and sense of duty had induced him, at the commencement of the war, to leave his wife and family at Arnwood, and he was fated never to meet them again. The news of his death had such an effect upon Mrs. Beverley, already worn with anxiety on her husband's account, that a few months

afterwards she followed him to an early tomb, leaving the four children under the charge of an elderly relative, till such time as the family of the Villiers could protect them; but, as will appear by our history, this was not at that period possible. The life of a king and many other lives were in jeopardy, and the orphans remained at Arnwood, still under the care of their elderly relations, at the time that our history commences.

The New Forest, my readers are perhaps aware, was first enclosed by William the Conqueror as a royal forest for his own amusement, for in those days most crowned heads were passionately fond of the chase; and they may also recollect that his successor, William Rufus, met his death in this forest by the glancing of an arrow shot by Sir Walter Tyrrell. Since that time to the present day, it has continued a royal domain. At the period of which we are writing, it had an establishment of verderers and keepers, paid by the Crown, amounting to some forty or fifty men. At the commencement of the civil war they remained at their posts, but soon found, in the disorganized state of the country, that their wages were no longer to be obtained; and then, when the King had decided upon raising an army, Beverley, who held a superior office in the forest, enrolled all the young and athletic men who were employed in the forest, and marched them away with him to join the King's army. Some few remained, their age not rendering their services of value, and among them was an old and attached servant of Beverley's, a man above sixty years of age, whose name was Jacob Armitage, and who had obtained the situation through Colonel Beverley's interest. Those who remained in the forest lived in cottages many miles asunder, and indemnified themselves for the non-payment of their salaries by killing the deer for sale and for their own subsistence.

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The cottage of Jacob Armitage was situated on the skirts of the New Forest, about a mile and a half from the mansion of Arnwood; and when Colonel Beverley went to join the King's troops, feeling how little security there would be for his wife and children in those troubled times, he requested the old man, by his attachment to the family, not to lose sight of Arnwood, but to call there as often as possible to see if he could be of service to Mrs. Beverley. The colonel would have persuaded Jacob to have altogether taken up his residence at the mansion; but to this the old man objected. He had been all his life under the greenwood tree, and could not bear to leave the forest. He promised the colonel that he would watch over his family, and ever be at hand when required; and he kept his word. The death of Colonel Beverley was a heavy blow to the old forester, and he watched over Mrs. Beverley and the orphans with the greatest solicitude; but when Mrs. Beverley followed her husband to the tomb, he then redoubled his attentions, and was seldom more than a few hours at a time away from the mansion. The two boys were his inseparable companions, and he instructed them, young as they were, in all the secrets of his own calling. Such was the state of affairs at the time that King Charles made his escape from Hampton Court; and I now shall resume my narrative from where it was broken off.

As soon as the escape of Charles I. was made known to Cromwell and the Parliament, troops of horse were dispatched in every direction to the southwards, toward which the prints of the horses' hoofs proved that he had gone. As they found that he had proceeded in the direction of the New Forest, the troops were subdivided and ordered to scour the forest, in parties of twelve to twenty, while others hastened down to Southampton,

Lymington, and every other seaport or part of the coast from which the King might be likely to embark. Old Jacob had been at Arnwood on the day before, but on this day he had made up his mind to procure some venison, that he might not go there again empty-handed; for Miss Judith Villiers was very partial to venison, and was not slow to remind Jacob, if the larder was for many days deficient in that meat. Jacob had gone out accordingly; he had gained his leeward position of a fine buck, and was gradually nearing him by stealth, now behind a huge oak-tree, and then crawling through the high fern, so as to get within shot unperceived, when on a sudden the animal, which had been quietly feeding, bounded away and disappeared in the thicket. At the same time, Jacob perceived a small body of horse galloping through the glen in which the buck had been feeding. Jacob had never yet seen the Parliamentary troops, for they had not during the war been sent in that part of the country, but their iron skull-caps, their buff accoutrements, and dark habiliments, assured him that such these must be; so very different were they from the gaily-equipped Cavalier cavalry commanded by Prince Rupert. At the time that they advanced, Jacob had been lying down in the fern near to some low blackthorn bushes; not wishing to be perceived by them, he drew back between the bushes, intending to remain concealed until they should gallop out of sight; for Jacob thought, "I am a king's forester, and they may consider me as an enemy; and who knows how I may be treated by them?" But Jacob was disappointed in his expectations of the troops riding past him; on the contrary, as soon as they arrived at an oak-tree within twenty yards of where he was concealed, the order was given to halt and dismount; the sabres of the horsemen clattered in their iron sheaths as the order was obeyed,

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and the old man expected to be immediately discovered; but one of the thorn bushes was directly between him and the troopers, and effectually concealed him. At last Jacob ventured to raise his head and peep through the bush, and he perceived that the men were loosening the girths of their black horses, or wiping away the perspiration from their sides with handfuls of fern.

A powerfully-framed man, who appeared to command the others, was standing with his hand upon the arched neck of his steed, which appeared as fresh and vigorous as ever, although covered with foam and perspiration. "Spare not to rub down, my men," said he, "for we have tried the mettle of our horses, and have now but one half-hour's breathing-time. We must be on, for the work of the Lord must be done."

"They say that this forest is many miles in length and breadth," observed another of the men, "and we may ride many a mile to no purpose; but here is James Southwold, who once was living in it as a verderer; nay, I think that he said that he was born and bred in these woods.—Was it not so, James Southwold?"

"It is even as you say," replied an active-looking young man; "I was born and bred in this forest, and my father was a verderer before me."

Jacob Armitage, who listened to the conversation, immediately recognized the young man in question. He was one of those who had joined the King's army with the other verderers and keepers. It pained him much to perceive that one who had always been considered a frank, true-hearted young man, and who left the forest to fight in defence of his king, was now turned a traitor, and had joined the ranks of the enemy; and Jacob thought how much better it had been for James Southwold, if he had never quitted the New Forest, and had not been corrupted

by evil company. "He was a good lad," thought Jacob, "and now he is a traitor and a hypocrite."

"If born and bred in this forest, James Southwold," said the leader of the troop, "you must fain know all its mazes and paths. Now call to mind—are there no secret hiding-places in which people may remain concealed; no thickets which may cover both man and horse? Peradventure thou mayest point out the very spot where this man Charles may be hidden."

"I do know one dell, within a mile of Arnwood," replied James Southwold, "which might cover double our troop from the eyes of the most wary."

"We will ride there then," replied the leader. "Arnwood, sayest thou? is not that the property of the Malignant Cavalier Beverley, who was shot down at Naseby?"

"Even so," replied Southwold; "and many is the time—that is, in the olden time, before I was regenerated—many is the day of revelry that I have passed there; many the cup of good ale that I have quaffed."

"And thou shalt quaff it again," replied the leader. "Good ale was not intended only for Malignants, but for those who serve diligently. After we have examined the dell which thou speakest of, we will direct our horses' heads towards Arnwood."

"Who knows but what the man Charles may be concealed in the Malignant's house?" observed another.

"In the day, I should say no," replied the leader; "but in the night the Cavaliers like to have a roof over their heads; and therefore at night, and not before, will we proceed thither."

"I have searched many of their abodes," observed another; "but search is almost in vain. What with their spring panels, and secret doors, their false ceilings,

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and double walls, one may ferret for ever and find nothing."

"Yes," replied the leader, "their abodes are full of these Popish abominations; but there is one way which is sure; and if the man Charles be concealed in any house, I venture to say that I will find him. Fire and smoke will bring him forth; and to every Malignant's house within twenty miles will I apply the torch; but it must be at night, for we are not sure of his being housed during the day. James Southwold, thou knowest well the mansion of Arnwood?"

"I know well my way to all the offices below—the buttery, the cellar, and the kitchen; but I cannot say that I have ever been into the apartments of the upper house."

"That it needeth not; if thou canst direct us to the lower entrance, it will be sufficient."

"That can I, Master Ingram," replied Southwold, "and to where the best ale used to be found."

"Enough, Southwold, enough; our work must be done, and diligently. Now, my men, tighten your girths; we will just ride to the dell: if it conceals not whom we seek, it shall conceal us till night, and then the country shall be lighted up with the flames of Arnwood, while we surround the house and prevent escape.—Levellers, to horse!"

The troopers sprang upon their saddles, and went off at a hard trot, Southwold leading the way. Jacob remained among the fern until they were out of sight, and then rose up. He looked for a short time in the direction in which the troopers had gone, stooped down again to take up his gun, and then said, "There's providence in this; yes, and there's providence in my not having my dog with me, for he would not have remained quiet for so long a time. Who could ever have thought that James Southwold

would have turned a traitor! more than traitor, for he is now ready to bite the hand that has fed him, to burn the house that has ever welcomed him. This is a bad world, and I thank Heaven that I have lived in the woods. But there is no time to lose;" and the old forester threw his gun over his shoulder and hastened away in the direction of his own cottage.

"And so the King has escaped," thought Jacob, as he went along, "and he may be in the forest! Who knows but he may be at Arnwood, for he must hardly know where to go for shelter? I must haste and see Miss Judith immediately. 'Levellers, to horse!' the fellow said. What's a leveller?" thought Jacob.

As perhaps my readers may ask the same question, they must know that a large portion of the Parliamentary army had at this time assumed the name of Levellers, in consequence of having taken up the opinion that every man should be on an equality, and property should be equally divided. The hatred of these people to any one above them in rank or property, especially towards those of the King's party, which mostly consisted of men of rank and property, was unbounded, and they were merciless and cruel to the highest degree, throwing off much of that fanatical bearing and language which had before distinguished the Puritans. Cromwell had great difficulty in eventually putting them down, which he did at last accomplish by hanging and slaughtering many. Of this Jacob knew nothing; all he knew was, that Arnwood was to be burnt down that night, and that it would be necessary to remove the family. As for obtaining assistance to oppose the troopers, that he knew to be impossible. As he thought of what must take place, he thanked God for having allowed him to gain the knowledge of what was to happen, and hastened on his way. He had been

about eight miles from Arnwood when he had concealed himself in the fern. Jacob first went to his cottage to deposit his gun, saddled his forest pony, and set off for Arnwood. In less than two hours the old man was at the door of the mansion; it was then about three o'clock in the afternoon, and being in the month of November, there was not so much as two hours of daylight remaining. "I shall have a difficult job with the stiff old lady," thought Jacob, as he rang the bell; "I don't believe that she would rise out of her high chair for old Noll and his whole army at his back. But we shall see."