

CHAPTER XV.

IT was now very dark, as there was no moon, and the stars were often obscured by the clouds, which were heavy, and borne along by the wind, which was very high. The light again appeared, and this time Edward heard the clash of the flint against the steel, and he was certain that it was somebody striking a light. He advanced very cautiously, and arrived at a large tree, behind which he remained to reconnoitre. The people, whoever they might be, were not more than thirty yards from him. A light spread its rays for a moment or two, and he could make out a figure kneeling and holding his hat to protect it from the wind; then it burned brighter, and he saw that a lantern had been lighted, and then again, of a sudden, all was dark again: so Edward immediately satisfied himself that a dark lantern had been lighted and then closed. Who the parties might be he of course had no idea; but he was resolved that he would ascertain, if he could, before he accosted them and asked his way.

"They have no dog," thought Edward, "or it would have growled before this; and it's lucky that I have none either." Edward then crept softly nearer to them. The wind, which was strong, blew from where they were to where Edward stood, so that there was less chance of their hearing his approach.

Edward went on his hands and knees, and crawled

through the fern until he gained another tree, and within ten yards of them, and from where he could hear what they might say. He was thus cautious, as he had been told by Oswald that there were many disbanded soldiers who had taken up their quarters in the forest, and had committed several depredations upon the houses adjacent to it, always returning to the forest as a rendezvous. Edward listened, and heard one say,—

“It is not time yet! No, no; too soon by half an hour or more. The people from Lymington who buy him what he wants always bring it to him at night, that his retreat may not be discovered. They sometimes do not leave the cottage till two hours after dark, for they do not leave Lymington to go there till it is dark.”

“Do you know who it is who supplies him with food?”

“Yes; the people at the inn in Parliament Street—I forget the sign.”

“Oh, I know! Yes, the landlord is a downright malignant in his heart! We might squeeze him well if we dared show ourselves in Lymington.”

“Yes, but they would squeeze our necks tighter than would be agreeable, I expect,” replied the other.

“Are you sure that he has money?”

“Quite sure; for I peeped through the chinks of the window-shutters, and I saw him pay for the things brought to him. It was from a canvas bag, and it was gold that he took out.”

“And where did he put the bag after he had paid them?”

“That I can't tell; for as I knew that they would come out as soon as they were paid, I was obliged to beat a retreat lest I should be seen.”

“Well, then, how is it to be managed?”

“We must first tap at the door, and try if we can get

in as benighted travellers. If that won't do, and I fear it will not, while you remain begging for admittance at the door, and keep him occupied, I will try the door behind, that leads into the garden; and if not the door, I will try the window. I have examined them both well, and have been outside when he has shut up his shutters, and I know the fastenings. With a pane out I could open them immediately."

"Is there anybody else besides him in the cottage?"

"Yes, a lad who attends him, and goes to Lymington for him."

"No women?"

"Not one."

"But do you think we two are sufficient? Had we not better get more help? There is Broom, and Black, the gipsy, at the rendezvous. I can go for them, and be back in time. They are stout and true."

"Stout enough, but not true. No, no, I want no sharers in this business, and you know how ill they behaved in the last affair. I'll swear that they only produced half the swag. I like honour between gentlemen and soldiers, and that's why I have chosen you. I know I can trust you, Benjamin. It's time now; what do you say? We are two to one, for I count the boy as nothing. Shall we start?"

"I am with you. You say there's a bag of gold, and that's worth fighting for."

"Yes, Ben, and I'll tell you: with what I've got buried, and my share of that bag, I shall have enough, I think; and I'll start for the Low Countries, for England's getting rather too warm for me."

"Well, I shan't go yet," replied Benjamin. "I don't like your foreign parts; they have no good ale, and I can't understand their talk. I'd sooner remain in jolly old England, with a halter twisted ready for me, than

pass my life with such a set of chaps who drink nothing but Schiedam, and wear twenty pair of breeches. Come, let's be off: If we get the money, you shall go to the Low Countries, Will, and I'll start for the north, where they don't know me—for if you go I won't stay here."

The two men then rose up; and the one whose name appeared to be Will first examined if the candle in his dark lantern burnt well, and then they both set off, followed by Edward, who had heard quite enough to satisfy him that they were bent upon a burglary—if not murder. Edward followed them, so as to keep their forms indistinctly in sight, which was as much as he could do at twenty yards' distance. Fortunately the wind was so high that they did not hear his footsteps, although he often trod upon a rotten stick, which snapped as it broke in twain. As near as Edward could guess, he had tracked them for about three miles, when they stopped, and he perceived that they were examining their pistols, which they took from their belts. They then went on again, and entered a small plantation of oak trees, of about forty years' growth—very thick and very dark, with close underwood below. They followed each other through a narrow path, until they came to a cleared place in the middle of the plantation, in which there stood a low cottage, surrounded with covert on every side, with the exception of some thirty yards of land around it. All was still, and as dark as pitch. Edward remained behind the trees, and when the two men again stopped he was not six feet from them. They consulted in a low tone, but the wind was so high that he could not distinguish what they said. At last they advanced to the cottage, and Edward, still keeping within the trees, shifted his position so that he should be opposite the gable end of the cottage. He observed one man go up to the front door, while the other

went round to the door behind, as had been agreed. Edward threw open the pan of the lock of his gun, and reprimed it, that he might be sure, and then waited for what was to follow. He heard the man Will at the front door, talking and asking for shelter in a plaintive but loud voice; and shortly afterwards he perceived a light through the chinks of the shutters—for Edward was continually altering his position to see what was going on in the front and in the back. At one time he thought of levelling his gun and killing one of the men at once; but he could not make up his mind to do that, as a burglary, although intended, had not yet been committed; so he remained passive until the attack was really made, when he resolved that he would come to the rescue. After some minutes of entreaty that they would open the door, the man in front commenced thumping and beating against it, as if he would make them open the door by force; but this was to attract the attention of those within, and divert it from the attempts that the other was making to get in behind. Edward was aware of this: he now kept his eye upon what was going on at the back. Advancing nearer, which he ventured to do now that both the men were so occupied, he perceived that the fellow had contrived to open the window close to the back door, and was remaining quite close to it with a pistol in his hand, apparently not wishing to run the risk of climbing in. Edward slipped under the eaves of the cottage, not six feet from the man, who remained with his back partly turned towards him. Edward then finding he had obtained this position unperceived, crouched down with his gun ready pointed.

As Edward remained in this position, he heard a shrill voice cry out, "They are getting in behind!" and a movement in the cottage. The man near him, who had

his pistol in his hand, put his arm through the window, and fired inside. A shriek was given, and Edward fired his gun into the body of the man, who immediately fell. Edward lost no time in reloading his gun, during which he heard the bursting open of the front door and the report of firearms; then all was silent for a moment, excepting the wailing of somebody within. As soon as his gun was reloaded, Edward walked round to the front of the cottage, where he found the man who was called Ben lying across the threshold of the open door. He stepped across the body, and, looking into the room within, perceived a body stretched on the floor, and a young lad weeping over it.

"Don't be alarmed; I am a friend," said Edward, going in to where the body lay; and taking the light which was at the farther end of the chamber, he placed it on the floor, that he might examine the state of the person, who was breathing heavily, and apparently badly wounded. "Rise up, my lad," said Edward, "and let me see if I can be of any use."

"Ah no!" cried the boy, throwing back his long hair from his temples; "he bleeds to death!"

"Bring me some water, quick," said Edward, "there's a good lad, while I see where he is hurt."

The boy ran up to fetch the water, and Edward discovered that the ball had entered the neck, above the collar-bone, and that the blood poured out of the man's mouth, who was choking with the effusion. Although ignorant of surgery, Edward thought that such a wound must be mortal; but the man was not only alive but sensible, and although he could not utter a word, he spoke with his eyes, and with signs. He raised his hand and pointed to himself first, and shook his head, as if to say that it was all over with him; and then he turned round his head, as if looking for the lad, who was now

returning with the water. When the lad again knelt by his side, weeping bitterly, the man pointed to him, and gave such an imploring look that Edward immediately comprehended what he wished: it was to ask protection for the boy. It could not be misunderstood, and could Edward do otherwise than promise it to the dying man? His generous nature could not refuse it, and he said, "I understand you: you wish me to take care of your boy when you are gone. Is it not so?"

The man signified assent.

"I promise you I will do so. I will take him into my own family, and he shall share with us."

The man raised his hand again, and a gleam of joy passed over his features as he took the hand of the lad and put it into that of Edward. His eyes were then fixed upon Edward, as if to scrutinize into his character by his features, while the former bathed his temples and washed the blood from his mouth with the water brought by the boy, who appeared in a state of grief so violent as to paralyze his senses. After a minute or two another effusion of blood choked the wounded man, who after a short struggle fell back dead.

"He is gone!" thought Edward. "And now what is to be done? I must first ascertain whether the two villains are dead or not."

Edward took a light and examined the body of Ben, lying over the threshold of the door: the man was quite dead, the ball having entered his brain. He was proceeding round the outside of the cottage to examine the state of the other man, whom he had shot himself; but the wind nearly blew out the light, and he therefore returned to the chamber and placed it on the floor, near to where the boy lay insensible over the corpse of the man who had died in the arms of Edward, and then went out without a light, and with his gun, to the other

side of the cottage, where the other robber had fallen. As he approached the man a faint voice was heard to say,—

“Ben, Ben, some water, for the love of God! Ben, I’m done for!”

Edward, without giving any answer, went back to the room for the water, which he took round to the man, and put it to his lips. He felt that he was bound by humanity so to do to a dying man, scoundrel though he might be. It was still dark, but not so dark as it had previously been, for the late moon was just rising.

The man drank the water eagerly, and said, “Ben, I can speak now, but I shan’t long.” He then pulled the basin towards him again, and after he had drunk, he said, in broken sentences, “I feel—that I am bleeding to death—inside.” Then he paused. “You know the oak—struck by lightning—a mile north—of this. Oh, I’m going fast! Three yards from it south—I buried all my—money; it’s yours. Oh, another drink.”

The man again attempted to drink out of the basin proffered by Edward; but as he made the attempt he fell back with a groan.

Edward, perceiving that he was dead, returned to the cottage to look after the lad, who still remained prostrate, and embracing the corpse in the chamber. Edward then reflected upon what had best be done. After a time he decided upon dragging away the body of the robber named Ben outside of the threshold, and then securing the door. This, with some trouble, he effected, and he then made fast the window that had been forced open behind. Before he removed the boy, who lay with his face buried on the corpse, and appeared to be in a state of insensibility, Edward examined the corpse as it lay. Although plainly dressed, yet it was evident that it was not the body of a rustic. The features were fair,

and the beard was carefully cut ; the hands were white, and the fingers long, and evidently had never been employed in labour. That the body was that of some superior person disguised as a rustic was evident, and this was corroborated by the conversation which took place between the two robbers. "Alas!" thought Edward, "the family of Arnwood appear not to be the only people who are in disguise in this forest. That poor boy! he must not remain there." Edward looked round, and perceived that there was a bed in the adjoining room, the door of which was open ; he lifted up the boy, and carried him, still insensible, into the room, and laid him on the bed. He then went for some more water, which he found and threw into his face, and poured a little into his mouth. Gradually the boy stirred, and recovered from his stupor ; and then Edward held the water to his mouth, and made him drink some, which he did, and then, suddenly aroused to a recollection of what had passed, the boy gave a shriek of woe, and burst into a paroxysm of tears. This ended in convulsive sobbings and low moanings. Edward felt that he could do no more at present, and that it would be better if he was left for a time to give vent to his grief. Edward sat down on a stool by the side of the orphan, and remained for some time in deep and melancholy thought.

"How strange," thought he at last, "it is that I should feel so little as I do now, surrounded by death, compared to what I did when good old Jacob Armitage died! Then I felt it deeply, and there was an awe in death. Now I no longer dread it. Is it because I loved the good old man, and felt that I had lost a friend? No, that cannot be the cause ; I may have felt more grief, but not awe or dread. Or is it because that was the first time that I had seen death, and it is the first

sight of death which occasions awe? Or is it because that every day I have fancied myself on the battlefield, with hundreds lying dead and wounded around me, in my dreamings? I know not. Poor old Jacob died peaceably in his bed, like a good Christian, and trusting, after a blameless life, to find mercy through his Saviour. Two of these who are now dead, out of three, have been summoned away in the height of their wickedness, and in the very commission of crime; the third has been foully murdered; and out of the three lying dead, one has fallen by my own hand, and yet I feel not so much as when I attended the couch and listened to the parting words of a dying Christian! I cannot account for it, or reason why; I only know that it is so, and I now look upon death unconcerned. Well, this is a kind of preparation for the wholesale murder and horrors of the battlefield, which I have so long sighed for—God forgive me if I am wrong. And this poor boy! I have promised to protect him, and I will. Could I fail my promise, I should imagine the spirit of his father (as I presume he was) looking down and upbraiding me. No, no, I will protect him. I and my brother and sisters have been preserved and protected, and I were indeed vile if I did not do to others as I have been done by. And now let me reflect what is to be done. I must not take the boy away and bury the bodies; this person has friends at Lymington, and they will come here. The murder has taken place in the forest: then I must let the Intendant know what has occurred. I will send over to Oswald; Humphrey shall go. Poor fellow! what a state of anxiety must he and my little sisters be in at my not returning home! I had quite forgotten that; but it cannot be helped. I will wait till sunrise, and then see if the boy will be more himself, and probably from him I shall be able to find out what part of the forest I am in.”

Edward took up the candle and went into the room in which he had laid the boy on the bed. He found him in a sound sleep. "Poor fellow," said Edward, "he has for a time forgotten his misery. What a beautiful boy he is! I long to know his history. Sleep on, my poor fellow; it will do you service."

Edward then returned to the other room, and recollected, or rather was reminded, that he had had no supper, and it was nearly dawn of day. He looked into a cupboard, and found plenty of provisions and some flasks of wine. "I have earned my supper," thought he, "and I will not, therefore, deny myself." So he brought out the viands and a flask of wine, and made a hearty meal. "It is long since I have tasted wine," thought he, "and it may be long ere I drink it again. I have little relish for it now; it is too fiery to the palate. I recollect, when a child, how my father used to have me at the table, and give me a stoup of claret, which I could hardly lift to my lips, to drink to the health of the King." The memory of the King raised other thoughts in Edward's mind, and he again sank into one of his reveries, which lasted till he fell into a slumber. When he woke up, it was at the voice of the boy, who in his sleep had cried out, "Father!" Edward started up, and found that the sun was an hour high, and that he must have slept some time. He gently opened the cottage door, looked at the bodies of the two men, and then walked out to survey the locality of the cottage, which he had but faintly made out during the night. He found that it was surrounded by a thicket of trees and underwood, so close and thick that there appeared to him no outlet in any direction. "What a place for concealment!" thought Edward; "but still these prowling thieves discovered it. Why, troops of horse might scour the forest for months, and never discover such a hiding-place."

Edward walked round by the side of the thicket, to find out the track by which the robbers had entered when he followed them, and at last succeeded in doing so. He followed the path through the thicket until he was clear of it, and again in the forest; but the scenery outside was unknown to him, and he had not an idea as to what part of the forest it was in. "I must question the boy," thought Edward. "I will go back and wake him up, for it is time that I was moving." As he was again turning into the thicket he heard a dog giving tongue, as if on a scent. It came nearer and nearer to him, and Edward remained to see what it might be. In a moment more he perceived his own dog, Smoker, come bounding out of a neighbouring copse, followed by Humphrey and Pablo. Edward hallooed. Smoker sprang towards him, leaping up, and loading him with caresses, and in another moment he was in Humphrey's arms.

"O Edward, let me first thank God!" said Humphrey, as the tears started and rolled down his cheeks. "What a night we have passed! What has happened? That dear fellow Pablo thought of putting Smoker on the scent; he brought out your jacket and showed it to Smoker, and gave it him to smell, and then led him along till he was on your footsteps; and the dog followed him, it seems, although it has been round and round in every direction, till at last he has brought us to you."

Edward shook hands with Pablo, and thanked him.

"How far are we from the cottage, Humphrey?"

"About eight miles, I should say, Edward—not more."

"Well, I have much to tell you, and I must tell it to you in few words before I go farther, and afterwards I will tell you all in detail."

Edward then gave a succinct narration of what had occurred, and having prepared Humphrey and Pablo for what they were to see, led the way back through the

thicket to the cottage inside of it. Humphrey and Pablo were much shocked at the scene of slaughter which presented itself to their eyes; and after having viewed the bodies they began to consult what had best be done.

The proposal of Edward that Humphrey should go over and make known the circumstances to Oswald, that they might be communicated to the Intendant, was readily acceded to; and Pablo, it was agreed, should go home and tell Alice and Edith that Edward was safe.

“But now, Humphrey, about this boy. We cannot leave him here.”

“Where is he?”

“He still sleeps, I believe. The question is, whether you should ride over with the pony, or walk, and leave Pablo to return with the pony and cart; for I will not take the boy away, or leave the house myself, without removing the property which belongs to the boy, and of which I will make inquiry when he wakes. Besides, there is money, by what the robbers stated, which of course must be taken care of for him.”

“I think it will be best for me to walk over, Edward. If I ride, I should arrive too late in the afternoon for anything to be done till next morning; and if I walk, I shall be in time enough, so that is settled. Besides, it will give you more time to remove the boy's property, which, as his father was in all probability a Malignant and a denounced man, they might think right to secure for the Government.”

“Very true; then be it so. Do you start for the Intendant's.—And, Pablo, go home and fetch the pony and cart, while I remain here with the boy, and get everything ready.”

Humphrey and Pablo both set off, and then Edward went to waken the boy, still lying on the bed.

“Come, you must get up now. You know that what's

done cannot be undone ; and if you are a good boy, and have read the Bible, you must know that we must submit to the will of God, who is our kind Father in heaven."

" Ah me ! " said the boy, who was awake when Edward went to him, " I know well it is my duty, but it is a hard duty, and I am heart-broken. I have lost my father, the only friend I had in the world. Who is there to love and to cherish me now ? What will become of me ? "

" I promised your father, before he died, that I would take care of you, my poor fellow ; and a promise is sacred with me, even if it were not made to a dying man. I will do my best, depend upon it, for I have known myself what it is to want and to find a protector. You shall live with me and my brother and sisters, and you shall have all we have."

" Have you sisters, then ? " replied the boy.

" Yes. I have sent for the cart to take you away from this, and to-night you shall be in our cottage ; but now tell me—I do not ask who your father was, or why he was living here in secret, as I found it out by what I overheard the robbers say to one another—but how long have you lived here ? "

" More than a year."

" Whose cottage is it ? "

" My father bought it when he came, as he thought it safer so, that he might not be discovered or betrayed ; for he had escaped from prison after having been condemned to death by the Parliament."

" Then he was a loyal man to his King ? "

" Yes, he was, and that was his only crime."

" Then fear not, my good boy. We are all loyal as well as he was, and will never be otherwise. I tell you this that you may safely trust to us. Now, if the cottage was his, the furniture and property were his also."

"Yes; all was his."

"And it is now yours, is it not?"

"I suppose so," said the boy, bursting into tears.

"Then listen to me. Your father is safe from all persecution now—he is, I trust, in heaven; and you they cannot touch, as you have done nothing to offend them; but still they will take possession of your father's property as soon as they know of his death and find out who he was. This, for your sake, I wish to prevent them from doing, and have therefore sent for the cart, that I may remove to my cottage everything that is of value, that it may be held for your benefit. Some day or another you may require it. The murder having been committed in the forest, and I having been a witness, and, moreover, having shot one of the robbers—I have considered it right to send over to the Intendant of the forest, to give him notice of what has taken place within his jurisdiction. I do not think he is so bad a man as the rest; but still, when he comes here, he may consider it his duty to take possession of everything for the Parliament, as I have no doubt such are his orders, or will be when he communicates with the Parliament. Now, this is a robbery which I wish to prevent by carrying away your property before they come over, which they will to-morrow; and I propose that you shall accompany me, with all that you can take away, or that may be useful, this evening."

"You are very kind," replied the boy. "I will do all you wish; but I feel very weak and very unwell."

"You must exert yourself for your own sake, my poor fellow. Come now, sit up and put all your own clothes together. Collect everything in this room while I look about the house. And tell me, had not your father some money? for the robbers said that they saw him

counting it out of a sack, through the chinks of the shutters, and that was why they made the attack."

"Hateful money!" cried the boy. "Yes; he had, I believe, a great deal of money, but I cannot say how much."

"Now get up, and do as I request, my dear boy," said Edward, raising him up in his arms. "When your grief is lessened you may have many happy days yet in store for you. You have a Father in heaven that you must put your trust in, and with Him you will find peace."

The boy rose up, and Edward closed the door of the chamber, that he might not see his father's corpse.

"I do put my trust in heaven, good sir," replied the boy, "for it has already sent me a kind friend in my distress. You are good, I am sure—I see that in your face. Alas! how much more wretched would have been my condition if you had not fortunately come to our assistance—too late, indeed, to save my poor father, but not too late to succour and console his child. I will go away with you, for I cannot stay here."