

CHAPTER XVI.

EDWARD then took the counterpane off the bed, and went with it into the next room. He gently drew the body to the corner of the room, and covered it up with the counterpane, and then proceeded to examine the cupboards, etc. In one he found a good store of books; in another there was linen of all sorts, a great many curious arms, two suits of bright armour such as worn in those times, pistols and guns and ammunition. On the floor of one of the cupboards was an iron chest about two feet by eighteen inches. It was locked. Edward immediately concluded that this chest held the money of the unfortunate man; but where was the key? Most likely about his person. He did not like to afflict the poor boy by putting the question to him, but he went to the body and examined the pockets of the clothes. He found a bunch of several keys, which he took, and then replaced the coverlid. He tried one of the keys, which appeared to be of the right size, to the lock of the iron chest, and found that it fitted it. Satisfied with this, he did not raise the lid of the chest, but dragged it out into the centre of the room. There were many things of value about the room: the candlesticks were silver, and there were goblets of the same metal. Edward collected all these articles and a timepiece, and put them into a basket of which there were two large ones at the end of the room, apparently used for hold-

ing firewood. Everything that he thought could be useful or of value he gathered together for the benefit of the poor orphan boy. He afterwards went into another small room, where he found sundry small trunks and cases locked up. These he brought out without examining, as he presumed that they contained what was of value, or they would not be locked. When he had collected everything, he found that he had already more than the cart could carry in one trip; and he wanted to take some bedding with him, as he had not a spare bed in the cottage to give to the boy. Edward decided in his own mind that he would take the most valuable articles away that night, and return with the cart for the remainder early on the following morning. It was now past noon, and Edward took out of the cupboard what victuals were left, and then went into the chamber where the boy was, and begged that he would eat something. The poor boy said that he had no appetite; but Edward insisted, and at last prevailed upon him to eat some bread and drink a glass of wine, which proved of great service to him. The poor fellow shuddered as he saw the body covered up in the corner of the room, but said nothing. Edward was trying to make him eat a little more, when Pablo made his appearance at the door.

“Have you put up all that you want in the bed-chamber?” said Edward.

“Yes, I have put up everything.”

“Then we will bring them out.—Come, Pablo, you must help us.”

Pablo made signs, and pointed to the door. Edward went out.

“First pull body away from this.”

“Yes,” replied Edward; “we must do so.”

Edward and Pablo pulled the body of the robber on

one side of the doorway, and threw over it some dried fern which lay by; they then backed the cart down to the door; the iron chest was first got in, then all the heavy articles, such as armour, guns, and books, etc.; and by that time the cart was more than half loaded. Edward then went into the chamber, and brought out the packages the boy had made up, and put them all in the cart, until it was loaded high up; they brought out some blankets, and laid over all, to keep things steady; and then Edward told the boy that all was ready, and that they had better go.

"Yes, I am willing," replied he, with streaming eyes; "but let me see him once more."

"Come, then," said Edward, leading him to the corpse, and uncovering the face.

The boy knelt down, kissed the forehead and cold lips, covered up the face again, and then rose and wept bitterly on Edward's shoulder. Edward did not attempt to check his sorrow—he thought it better it should have vent—but after a time he led the boy by degrees till they were out of the cottage.

"Now then," said Edward, "we must go, or we shall be late. My poor little sisters have been dreadfully alarmed at my not having come home last night, and I long to clasp them in my arms."

"Indeed you must," replied the boy, wiping away his tears, "and I am very selfish; let us go on."

"No room for cart to get through wood," said Pablo. "Hard work, cart empty; more hard work, cart full."

And so it proved to be, and it required all the united efforts of Billy, Edward, and Pablo to force a passage for the cart through the narrow pathway; but at last it was effected, and then they went on at a quick pace, and in less than two hours the cottage was in sight. When within two hundred yards of it Edith, who had

been on the watch, came bounding out, and flew into Edward's arms, and covered him with kisses.

"You naughty Edward, to frighten us so!"

"Look, Edith, I have brought you a nice little play-fellow. Welcome him, dearest."

Edith extended her hand as she looked into the boy's face.

"He is a pretty boy, Edward—much prettier than Pablo."

"No, Missy Edith," said Pablo; "Pablo more man than he."

"Yes, you may be more man, Pablo; but you are not so pretty."

"And where is Alice?"

"She was getting supper ready, and I did not tell her that I saw you coming, because I wanted first kiss."

"You little jealous thing! But here comes Alice.—Dear Alice, you have been very uneasy, but it was not my fault," said Edward, kissing her. "If I had not been where I was, this poor boy would have been killed as well as his father. Make him welcome, Alice, for he is an orphan now, and must live with us. I have brought many things in the cart; and to-morrow we will bring more, for we have no bed for him, and to-night he must sleep with me."

"We will make him as happy as we can, Edward, and we will be sisters to him," said Alice, looking at the boy, who was blushing deeply.—"How old are you, and what is your name?"

"I am thirteen years old next January," replied the boy.

"And your Christian name?"

"I will tell you by-and-by," replied he, confused.

They arrived at the cottage, and Edward and Pablo were busy unpacking the cart and putting all the con-

tents into the inner chamber, where Pablo now slept, when Alice, who with Edith had been talking to the boy, came to Edward and said,—

“Edward, she’s a girl!”

“A girl!” replied Edward, astonished.

“Yes, she has told me so, and wished me to tell you.”

“But why does she wear boy’s clothes?”

“It was her father’s wish, as he was very often obliged to send her to Lymington to a friend’s house, and he was afraid of her getting into trouble. But she has not told me her story as yet; she says that she will to-night.”

“Well, then,” replied Edward, “you must make up a bed for her in your room to-night. Take Pablo’s bed, and he shall sleep with me. To-morrow morning I will bring some more bedding from her cottage.”

“How Humphrey will be surprised when he comes back!” said Alice, laughing.

“Yes—she will make a nice little wife for him some years hence; and she may prove an heiress perhaps, for there is an iron chest with money in it.”

Alice returned to her new companion, and Edward and Pablo continued to unload the cart.

“Well, Pablo, I suppose you will allow that now that you know that she is a girl she is handsomer than you?”

“Oh yes,” replied Pablo; “very handsome girl, but too much girl for handsome boy.”

At last everything was out of the cart, the iron chest dragged into Pablo’s room, and Billy put into his stable and given his supper, which he had well earned, for the cart had been very heavily loaded. They then all sat down to supper, Edward saying to their new acquaintance,—

“So I find that I am to have another sister instead of another brother. Now you will tell me your name?”

“Yes; Clara is my name.”

"And why did you not tell me that you are a girl?"

"I did not like, because I was in boy's clothes, and felt ashamed; indeed I was too unhappy to think about what I was. My poor dear father!" and she burst into tears.

Alice and Edith kissed her and consoled her, and she became calm again. After supper was over they busied themselves making arrangements for her sleeping in their room, and then they went to prayers.

"We have much to be thankful for, my dears," said Edward. "I am sure I feel that I have been in great danger, and I only wish that I had been more useful than I have been; but it has been the will of God, and we must not arraign His decrees. Let us return thanks for His great mercies, and bow in submission to His dispensations, and pray that He will give peace to poor little Clara, and soften her affliction."

And as Edward prayed, little Clara knelt and sobbed, while Alice caressed her with her arm round her waist, and stopped at times her prayer to kiss and console her. When they had finished, Alice led her away to her bedroom, followed by Edith, and they put her to bed. Edward and Pablo also retired, both worn out by the fatigue and excitement of the day.

They were up on the following morning at day-dawn, and putting Billy in the cart, set off for the cottage of Clara. They found everything as they had left it, and having loaded the cart with what had been left behind the day before, and bedding for two beds, with several articles of furniture which Edward thought might be useful, there being still a little room left, Edward packed up in a wooden case with dried fern all the wine that was in the cupboard; and having assisted Pablo in forcing the cart once more through the path in the wood, he left him to return home with the cart, while

he remained to wait the arrival of Humphrey, and whoever might come with him from the Intendant's. About ten o'clock, as he was watching outside of the wood, he perceived several people approaching him, and soon made out that Humphrey, the Intendant, and Oswald were among the number. When they came up to him, Edward saluted the Intendant in a respectful manner, and shook hands with Oswald, and then led the way by the narrow path which led through the wood to the cottage. The Intendant was on horseback, but all the rest were on foot.

The Intendant left his horse to the care of one of the verderers, and went through the wood on foot with the rest of the party, preceded by Edward. He appeared to be very grave and thoughtful, and Edward thought that there was a coolness in his manner towards himself—for it must be recollected that Mr. Heatherstone had not seen Edward since he had rendered him such service in saving the life of his daughter. The consequence was that Edward felt somewhat indignant; but he did not express his feelings by his looks even, but conveyed the party in silence to the cottage. On their arrival Edward pointed to the body of the robber, which had been covered with fern, and the verderers exposed it.

"By whose hand did that man fall?" said the Intendant.

"By the hand of the party who lived in the cottage." (Edward then led the way round to the back of the cottage, where the other robber lay.) "And this man was slain by my hand," replied Edward.—"We have one more body to see," continued Edward, leading the way into the cottage and uncovering the corpse of Clara's father.

Mr. Heatherstone looked at the face, and appeared

much moved. "Cover it up," said he, turning away; and then, sitting down on a chair close to the table,—

"And how was this found?" he said.

"I neither saw this person killed, nor the robber you first saw, but I heard the report of the firearms at almost the same moment, and I presume that they fell by each other's hands."

The Intendant called his clerk, who had accompanied him, and desired him to get ready his writing materials, and then said,—

"Edward Arnitage, we will now take down your deposition as to what has occurred."

When Edward then commenced by stating "that he was out in the forest and had lost his way, and was seeking his way home——"

"You were out in the forest during the night?"

"Yes, sir, I was."

"With your gun?"

"I always carry my gun," replied Edward.

"In pursuit of game?"

"No, sir, I was not. I have never been out in pursuit of game during nighttime in my life."

"What were you then about? You did not go out for nothing?"

"I went out to commune with my own thoughts. I was restless, and I wandered about without knowing where I went, and that is the reason why I lost my way."

"And pray, what may have excited you?"

"I will tell you. I was over with Oswald Partridge the day before; you had just arrived from London, and he gave me the news that King Charles had been proclaimed in Scotland, and that news unsettled me."

"Well, proceed."

Edward met with no more interruption in his narra-

tive. He stated briefly all that had taken place, from the time he fell in with the robbers till the winding up of the catastrophe.

The clerk took down all that Edward had stated, and then read it over to him to ascertain if he had written it down correctly, and then inquired of Edward if he could read and write.

"I should hope so," replied Edward, taking the pen and signing his name.

The clerk stared, and then said, "People in your condition do not often know how to read and write, Mr. Forester, and therefore you need not be offended at the question."

"Very true," replied Edward. "May I ask if my presence is considered any longer to be necessary?"

"You stated that there was a boy in the house, young man," said the Intendant. "What has become of him?"

"He is removed to my cottage."

"Why did you do so?"

"Because when his father died I promised to him that I would take care of his child; and I intend to keep my word."

"You had spoken with him, then, before he died," said the Intendant.

"Not so; it was all carried on by signs on his part, but it was as intelligible as if he spoke, and what I replied he well understood; and I really think I removed a great anxiety off his mind by giving him the promise."

The Intendant paused, and then said, "I perceive that some articles have been removed—the bedding, for instance. Have you taken anything away?"

"I have removed bedding, for I had no bed to offer to the lad; and he told me that the cottage and furniture belonged to his father. Of course by his father's

death it became his, and I felt that I was warranted in so doing."

"May I ask, did you remove any papers?"

"I cannot tell. The lad packed up his own things. There were some boxes removed, which were locked up, and the contents are to me wholly unknown. I could not leave the boy here in this scene of death, and I could not well leave the property belonging to him to be at the mercy of any other plunderers of the forest. I did as I considered right for the benefit of the boy, and in accordance with the solemn promise which I made to his father."

"Still, the property should not have been removed. The party who now lies dead there is a well-known Malignant."

"How do you know that, sir?" interrupted Edward. "Did you recognize him when you saw the body?"

"I did not say that I did," replied the Intendant.

"You either must have so done, sir," replied Edward, "or you must have been aware that he was residing in this cottage. You have to choose between."

"You are bold, young man," replied the Intendant, "and I will reply to your observation. I did recognize the party when I saw his face, and I knew him to be one who was condemned to death, and who escaped from prison a few days before the one appointed for his execution. I heard search had been made for him, but in vain, and it was supposed that he had escaped beyond the seas. Now his papers may be the means of giving the Parliament information against others as well as himself."

"And enable them to commit a few more murders," added Edward.

"Silence, young man; the authorities must not be spoken of in so irreverent a manner. Are you aware that your language is treasonable?"

“According to Act of Parliament, as at present constituted, it may be,” replied Edward; “but as a loyal subject of King Charles the Second I deny it.”

“I have no concern with your loyalty, young man, but I will not admit any language to be uttered in my presence against the ruling powers. The inquest is over. Let every one leave the house except Edward Armitage, to whom I would speak alone.”

“Excuse me one moment, sir,” said Edward, “and I will return.”

Edward went out with the rest, and calling Humphrey aside, said to him, “Contrive to slip away unperceived; here are the keys; haste to the cottage as fast as you can; look for all the papers you can find in the packages taken there; bury them in the iron chest in the garden, or anywhere where they cannot be discovered.”

Humphrey nodded and turned away, and Edward re-entered the cottage.

He found the Intendant was standing over the corpse. He had removed the coverlid, and was looking mournfully down on the face disfigured with blood. Perceiving the entrance of Edward, he again took his seat at the table, and after a pause said,—

“Edward Armitage, that you have been brought up very superior to your station in life is certain; and that you are loyal, bold, and resolute is equally so. You have put me under an obligation which I never can repay, even if you allowed me to exert myself in your behalf. I take this opportunity of acknowledging it; and now allow me to say that for these times you are much too frank and impetuous. This is no time for people to give vent to their feelings and opinions. Even I am as much surrounded with spies as others, and am obliged to behave myself accordingly. Your avowed attachment to the King’s cause has prevented me from

showing that more than cordiality that I really feel for you, and to which you are in every way entitled."

"I cannot conceal my opinions, sir. I was brought up in the house of a loyal Cavalier, and never will be otherwise."

"Granted; why should you be? But do you not yourself see that you do the cause more harm than good by thus avowing your opinions when such avowal is useless? If every other man in the county who is of your opinion was to express himself, now that your cause is hopeless, as you have done, the prisons would be crowded, the executions would be daily, and the cause would be in proportion weakened by the loss of the most daring. 'Bide your time,' is a good motto, and I recommend it to you. You must feel that, however we may be at variance in our opinions, Edward Armitage, my hand and my authority never can be used against one to whom I am so indebted; and feeling this, you compel me in the presence of others to use a harshness and coldness towards you contrary—wholly contrary—to what, you may believe me when I say it, I really feel for one who so nobly rescued my only child."

I thank you, sir, for your advice, which I feel to be good; and for your good opinion, which I value."

"And which I feel that you deserve. And you shall have, young as you are, my confidence, which I know you will not abuse. I did know this man who now lies dead before us, and I did also know that he was concealed in this cottage. Major Ratcliffe was one of my earliest and dearest friends, and until this unhappy civil war there never was a difference between us, and even afterwards only in politics and the cause we each espoused. I knew, before I came down here as Intendant, where his place of concealment was, and have been most anxious for his safety."

"Excuse me, Mr. Heatherstone, but each day I find more to make me like you than I did the day before. At first I felt most inimical; now I only wonder how you can be leagued with the party you now are."

"Edward Armitage, I will now answer for myself and thousands more. You are too young a man to have known the cause of the insurrection, or rather opposition to the unfortunate King Charles. He attempted to make himself absolute, and to wrest the liberties from the people of England; that his warmest adherents will admit. When I joined the party which opposed him, I little thought that matters would have been carried so far as they have been. I always considered it lawful to take up arms in defence of our liberties, but at the same time I equally felt that the person of the King was sacred."

"I have heard so, sir."

"Yes, and in truth: for never did any people strive more zealously to prevent the murder of the King—for murder it was—than my relative Ashley Cooper and myself; so much so, indeed, as to have incurred not only the suspicion but the ill-will of Cromwell, who, I fear, is now making rapid advances towards that absolute authority for which the King has suffered, and which he would now vest in his own person. I considered that our cause was just; and had the power been left in the hands of those who would have exercised it with discretion and moderation, the King would even now have been on the throne, and the liberties of his subjects sacred; but it is easier to put a vast and powerful engine into motion than to stop it, and such has been the case in this unfortunate civil war. Thousands who took an active part against the King will, when the opportunity is ripe, retrace their steps; but I expect that we have much to suffer before that time

will come. And now, Edward Armitage, I have said more to you than I have to any person breathing, except my own kinsman."

"I thank you for your confidence, sir, which not only will not be betrayed, but will act as a warning to guide my future conduct."

"I meant it should. Be no longer rash and careless in avowing your opinions. You can do no good to the cause, and may do yourself much harm.—And now I must ask you another question, which I could not before the other people. You have surprised me by stating that Major Ratcliffe had a son here. There must be some mistake, or the boy must be an impostor. He had a daughter—an only daughter, as I have—but he never had a son."

"It is a mistake that I fell into, sir, by finding a boy here, as I stated to you at the inquest; and I considered it to be a boy until I brought her home, and then she discovered to my sisters that she was a girl dressed in boy's clothes. I did not give that as explanation at the inquest, as it was not necessary."

"I am right, then. I must relieve you of that charge, Edward Armitage. She shall be to me as a daughter, and I trust that you will agree with me, without any disparagement to your feelings, that my house will be a more fit residence for her than your cottage."

"I will not prevent her going if she wishes it, after your explanation and confidence, Mr. Heatherstone."

"One thing more. As I said to you before, Edward Armitage, I believe many of these verderers, all of whom have been selected from the army, are spies upon me; I must therefore be careful. You said that you were not aware that there were any papers?"

"I saw none, sir; but I suspect, from the many locked-up trunks and small boxes, that there may be.

But when I went out with the others from the inquest, I dispatched my brother Humphrey to the cottage, advising him to open all the locks, and to remove any papers which he might find."

The Intendant smiled.

"Well, if such is the case, we have only to go to your cottage and make an examination. We shall find nothing, and I shall have performed my duty. I was not aware that your brother was here. I presume it was the young man who walked with Oswald Partridge."

"It was, sir."

"By his appearance, I presume that he also was brought up at Arnwood?"

"He was, sir, as well as I," replied Edward.

"Well, then, I have but one word more to say. Recollect, if I appear harsh and severe in the presence of others, it is only assumed towards you, and not real. You understand that?"

"I do, sir, and beg you will exercise your discretion."

The Intendant then went out and said to the party, "It appears, from what I can extract from this lad Armitage, that there are boxes which he removed to his cottage. We will go there to see what they may contain. It is now noon.—Have you any refreshment to offer us in your cottage, young man, when we arrive?"

"I keep no hostelry, sir," replied Edward somewhat gloomily. "My own labour and my brother's is sufficient for the support of my own family, but no more."

"Let us move on; and two of you keep your eye upon that young man," said the Intendant, aside.

They then proceeded through the wood. The Intendant mounted his horse, and they set off for the cottage, where they arrived at about two o'clock in the afternoon.