

CHAPTER XVII.

HUMPHREY came out as soon as he perceived the Intendant and his party approaching, and whispered to Edward that all was safe. The Intendant dismounted, and ordering everybody but his clerk to wait outside, was ushered into the cottage by Edward. Alice, Edith, and Pablo were in the room. The two girls were not a little flushed and frightened by the unusual appearance of so large a body of strangers.

"These are my sisters, sir," said Edward.—"Where is Clara, Alice?"

"She is alarmed, and has gone into our bedroom."

"I hope you are not alarmed at my presence," said the Intendant, looking earnestly at the two girls. "It is my duty which obliges me to pay this visit; but you have nothing to fear.—Now, Edward Armitage, you must produce all the boxes and packages which you took from the cottage."

"I will, sir," replied Edward, "and here are the keys.—Humphrey, do you and Pablo bring them out."

The boxes were brought out, opened, and examined by the Intendant and his clerk, but of course no papers were found in them.

"I must now send in two of my people to search the house," said the Intendant. "Had you not better go to the little girl, that she may not be frightened?"

"I will go to her," said Alice.

Two of the people, assisted by the clerk, then searched the house. They found nothing worthy of notice, except the weapons and armour which Edward had removed, and which he stated to the Intendant that he took away as valuable property belonging to the little girl.

"It is sufficient," said the Intendant to his clerk—"undoubtedly there are no papers; but I must, before I go, interrogate this child, who has been removed thus. But she will be frightened, and I shall obtain no answer from her, if we are so many, so let everybody leave the cottage while I speak to her."

The clerk and the others left the cottage, and the Intendant desired Edward to bring Clara from the bedroom. She came out accompanied by, and clinging indeed to, Alice, for she was much alarmed.

"Come here, Clara," said the Intendant gently. "You do not know, perhaps, that I am your sincere friend; and now that your father is dead, I want you to come and live with my daughter, who will be delighted to have you as a companion. Will you go with me? and I will take care of you and be a father to you."

"I do not like to leave Alice and Edith; they treat me so kindly, and call me sister," replied Clara, sobbing.

"I am sure they do, and that you must be fond of them already; but still it is your duty to come with me; and if your father could speak to you now, he would tell you so. I will not force you away; but remember you are born a lady, and must be brought up and educated as a lady, which cannot be the case in this cottage, although they are very kind to you and very nice young people. You do not recollect me, Clara, but you have often sat on my knee when you were a little girl, and when your father lived in Dorsetshire. You recollect the great walnut tree by the sitting-room window, which looked out in the garden, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Clara, with surprise.

"Yes, so do I too, and how you used to sit on my knee. And do you remember Jason, the big mastiff, and how you used to ride upon his back?"

"Yes," replied Clara, "I do; but he died a long while ago."

"He did, when you were not more than six years old. And now tell me, where did the old gardener bury him?"

"Under the mulberry tree," replied Clara.

"Yes, so he did; and I was there when poor Jason was buried. You don't recollect me. But I will take off my hat, for I did not wear the same dress that I do now. Now look, Clara, and see if you remember me."

Clara, who was no longer alarmed, looked on the Intendant's face, and then said, "You called my father Philip, and he used to call you Charles."

"You are right, my sweet one," replied the Intendant, pressing Clara to his bosom; "I did so, and we were great friends. Now, will you come with me? and I have a little girl, older than you by three or four years, who will be your companion, and love you dearly."

"May I come and see Alice and Edith sometimes?"

"Yes, you shall; and she will come with you and make their acquaintance, if their brother will permit it. I will not take you away now, dearest. You shall remain here for a few days, and then we will come over and fetch you.—I will send Oswald Partridge over to let you know the day, Edward Armitage, when we will come for her.—Good-bye, dear Clara; and good-bye, my little girls.—Humphrey Armitage, good-bye.—Who is this lad you have there?"

"He is a gipsy whom Humphrey trapped in his pitfall, sir, and we have soon tamed him," replied Edward.

"Well, then, Edward Armitage, good-bye," said the

Intendant, extending his hand to him ; " we must meet soon again."

The Intendant then went out of the cottage, and joined his people outside. Edward went out after him ; and as the Intendant mounted his horse, he said very coldly to Edward, " I shall keep a sharp lookout on your proceedings, sir, depend upon it. I tell you so decidedly, so fare you well."

With these words the Intendant put the spurs to his horse and rode away.

" What made him speak so sharply to you, Edward ? " said Humphrey.

" Because he means kindly, but does not want other people to know it," replied Edward. " Come in, Humphrey ; I have much to tell you and much to surprise you with."

" I have been surprised already," replied Humphrey. " How did this Roundhead know Clara's father so well ? "

" I will explain all before we go to bed," replied Edward. " Let us go in now."

The two brothers had a long conversation that evening, in which Edward made Humphrey acquainted with all that had passed between him and the Intendant.

" It's my opinion, Edward," said Humphrey, " that he thinks matters have been carried too far, and that he is sorry that he belongs to the Parliamentary party. He finds out, now that it is too late, that he has allied himself with those who have very different feelings and motives than his own, and has assisted to put power into the hands of those who have not the scruples which he has."

" Yes ; and in ridding themselves of one tyranny, as they considered it, they have every prospect of falling into the hands of a greater tyrant than before—for,

depend upon it, Cromwell will assume the sovereign power, and rule this kingdom with a rod of iron."

"Well, many more are, I have no doubt, or soon will be, of his opinion; and the time will come, be it sooner or later, when the King will have his own again. They have proclaimed him in Scotland already. Why does he not come over and show himself? His presence would, I think, induce thousands to flock to him; I'm sure that it would me."

"I am very glad of this good intelligence with the Intendant, Edward, as it will not now be necessary for us to be so careful. We may go and come when we please. I almost wish you could be persuaded to accept any eligible offer he may make you. Many, no doubt, are in office and serving the present Government who have the same feelings as the Intendant, or even feelings as strong as your own."

"I cannot bear the idea of accepting anything from them or their instruments, Humphrey; nor, indeed, could I leave my sisters."

"On that score you may make your mind easy. Pablo and I are quite sufficient for the farm or anything else we may want to do. If you can be more useful elsewhere, have no scruple in leaving us. If the King was to come over and raise an army, you would leave us, of course; and I see no reason why, if an eligible offer is made you, you should not do it now. You and your talents are thrown away in this forest, and you might serve the King and the King's cause better by going into the world and watching the times than you ever can by killing his venison."

"Certainly," replied Edward, laughing, "I do not much help his cause by killing his deer; that must be admitted. All I shall say is this—if anything is offered to me which I can accept without injury to my feelings

and my honour, I shall not decline it, provided that I may, by accepting it, prove of service to the King's cause."

"That is all I wish, Edward. And now I think we had better go to bed."

The next day they dug up the iron chest and the box into which Humphrey had put all the papers he had collected together. Edward opened the iron chest, and found in it a considerable quantity of gold in bags, and many trinkets and jewels which he did not know the value of. The papers he did not open, but resolved that they should be given to the Intendant, for Edward felt that he could trust in him. The other boxes and trunks were also opened and examined, and many other articles of apparent value discovered.

"I should think all these jewels worth a great deal of money, Humphrey," said Edward. "If so, all the better for poor little Clara. I am sorry to part with her, although we have known her so short a time. She appears to be such an amiable and affectionate child."

"That she is; and certainly the handsomest little girl I ever saw. What beautiful eyes! Do you know that on one of her journeys to Lymington she was very nearly taken by a party of gipsies? and by what Pablo can make out, it would appear that it was by the party which he belonged to."

"I wonder at her father's permitting her to go alone such a distance."

"Her father could not do otherwise. Necessity has no law. He could trust no other person, so he put her in boy's clothes that there might be less risk. Still, she must have been very intelligent to have done the office."

"She is thirteen years old, although she is small," replied Edward. "And intelligent she certainly is, as

you may see by her countenance. Who would ever have imagined that our sisters would have been able to do what they are doing now? It's an old saying, 'We never know what we can do till we try.' By-the-bye, Humphrey, I met a famous herd of forest ponies the other day, and I said to myself, 'I wonder whether Humphrey will be clever enough to take one of them, as he has the wild cattle? For Billy is getting old, and we want a successor.' "

"We want more than a successor to Billy, Edward, we want two more to help him; and I have the means of maintaining two more ponies, if I could catch them."

"I fear that you will never manage that, Humphrey," said Edward, laughing.

"I know well what you mean," replied Humphrey: "you wish to dare me to do it. Well, I won't be dared to anything, and I most certainly will try to catch a pony or two; but I must think about it first, and when I have arranged my plan in my mind I will then make the attempt."

"When I see the ponies in the yard I will believe it, Humphrey. They are as wild as deer and as fleet as the wind, and you cannot catch them in a pitfall."

"I know that, good brother; but all I can say is that I will try what I can do, and I can do no more—but not at present, for I am too busy."

Three days after this conversation Oswald Partridge made his appearance, having been sent by the Intendant to tell Edward that he should come over on the following day to take away little Clara.

"And how is she to go?" said Edward.

"He will bring a little nag for her if she can ride; if she cannot, she must ride in the cart which will come for the baggage."

"Clara, can you ride a horse?"

"Yes," replied Clara, "if it does not jump about too much. I always rode one when I lived in Dorsetshire."

"This won't jump about, my little lady," said Oswald, "for he is thirty years old, I believe, and as steady as an old gentleman ought to be."

"I have had some conversation with Master Heatherstone," continued Oswald to Edward. "He is much pleased with you, I can tell you. He said that in times like these he required young men like you about him; and that as you would not take the berth of verderer, he must find one better suited for you, for he said you were too good for such an office."

"Many thanks to him for his good opinion," replied Edward; "but I do not think that he has any office in his gift which I can accept."

"So I thought, but I said nothing. He again asked many questions relative to old Jacob Armitage, and he pressed me very hard. He said that Humphrey was as much above his position in appearance as you were; but as he was brought up at Arnwood, he presumed that he had had the same advantages. And then he said, 'But were his two sisters brought up at Arnwood also?' I replied that I believed not, although they were often there, and were allowed to play with the children of the house. He looked at me steadfastly, as if he would read my thoughts, and then went on writing. I cannot help thinking that he has a suspicion that you are not the grandchildren of old Jacob; but at the same time I do not think that he has an idea who you really are."

"You must keep our secret, Oswald," replied Edward. "I have a very good opinion of the Intendant, I acknowledge; but I will trust nobody."

“As I hope for future mercy, sir, I never will divulge it until you bid me,” replied Oswald.

“I trust to you, Oswald, and so there’s an end of the matter. But tell me, Oswald, what do they say about his taking charge of this little girl?”

“Why, they did begin to talk about it; but when he gave out that it was the order of Parliament that the child should remain with him until further directions, of course they said nothing, for they dared not. It seems that the Ratcliffe property is sequestrated, but not yet granted to any one; and the Parliament will most likely, as soon as she is old enough, give her as a wife, with the property, to one of their party. They have done it before now, as it secures the property under all changes.”

“I perceive,” replied Edward. “When did you hear that the little girl was to live with him?”

“Not till yesterday morning; and it was not till the evening that we knew it was the order of Parliament.”

Edward did not think it right to tell Oswald what he knew, as it was a secret confided to him by the Intendant, and therefore merely observed, “I presumed that the child would not be left on our hands;” and then the conversation dropped.

As Oswald had informed them, the Intendant made his appearance in the forenoon of the following day, and was accompanied by his daughter, who rode by his side. A groom, on another horse, led a pony for Clara to ride; and a cart for the luggage followed at some distance. Edward went out to assist Miss Heatherstone to dismount, and she frankly extended her hand to him as she reached the ground. Edward was a little surprised as well as pleased at this condescension on her part towards a forester.

"You do me much honour, Mistress Patience," said he, bowing.

"I cannot forget that I owe my life to you, Master Armitage," replied Patience, "and I cannot be too grateful. May I request another favour of you?"

"Certainly, if it is in my power to do as you wish."

"It is this," said she in a low voice—"that you will not hastily reject any overtures which may be made to you by my father; that is all. And now let me go in and see your sisters, for my father has praised them very much, and I wish to know them."

Edward led the way into the cottage, and Patience followed him, while the Intendant was in conversation with Humphrey. Edward, having introduced his sisters and Clara, then went out to pay his respects to the Intendant, who, now they were alone, was very candid towards both him and Humphrey.

Edward then told the Intendant that there was an iron chest with a good deal of money in it, and jewels also, and many other articles of value in the other boxes.

"I fear, sir, that the cart will hardly hold all the goods."

"I do not intend to take away the heavy or more bulky articles, such as the bedding, armour, etc. I will only take Clara's own packages, and the valuables and papers. The remainder may stay here, as they can be of no use till they are demanded from you. Where is Oswald Partridge?"

"In the stable with the horses, sir," replied Humphrey.

"Then, when the cart is loaded—and it had better be done by you while the men are in the stable—Oswald shall take charge of it, and take the things to my house."

"Here are the keys, sir," said Edward, presenting them.

“Good. And now, Edward Armitage, that we are alone I want to have a little conversation with you. You are aware how much I feel indebted to you for the service you have rendered me, and how anxious I am to show my gratitude. You are born for better things than to remain an obscure forester, and perhaps a deer-stalker. I have now an offer to make to you, which I trust, upon reflection, you will not refuse; and I say reflection, because I do not wish you to give an answer till you have well reflected. I know that you will not accept anything under the present Government, but a private situation you can raise no objection to; the more so as, so far from leaving your family, you will be more in a position to protect them. I am in want of a secretary, and I wish you to accept that office, to live entirely in my house, and to receive a handsome salary for your services, which will not, I trust, be too heavy. You will be near to your family here in the cottage, and be able to protect them and assist them; and what is more, you will mix with the world and know what is going on, as I am in the confidence of the Government. Of course I put implicit confidence in you, or I would not offer the situation. But you will not be always down here: I have my correspondents and friends, to whom I shall have to send you occasionally on most trusty commissions. You, I am sure, will suit me in every respect, and I hope you will undertake the post which I now offer you. Give me no answer just now; consult with your brother, and give the offer due consideration, and when you have made up your mind you can let me know.”

Edward bowed, and the Intendant went into the cottage.

Edward then assisted Humphrey and Pablo to get the iron chest on the cart, and covered it with the other

packages and boxes, till the cart was well loaded. Leaving Pablo in charge till Oswald came from the stables, Edward and Humphrey then went into the cottage, where they found a very social party—Patience Heatherstone having succeeded in making great friends with the other three girls, and the Intendant, to Edward's surprise, laughing and joking with them. Alice and Edith had brought out some milk, biscuits, and all the fruit that was ripe, with some bread, a cold piece of salt beef, and a ham; and they were eating as well as talking.

"I have been praising your sisters' housekeeping, Armitage," said the Intendant. "Your farm appears to be very productive."

"Alice expected Miss Heatherstone, sir," replied Edward, "and made an unusual provision. You must not think that we live on such fare every day."

"No," replied the Intendant dryly; "on other days I dare say you have other fare. I would almost make a bet that there is a pasty in the cupboard which you dare not show to the Intendant of the New Forest."

"You are mistaken, sir, for once," replied Humphrey. "Alice knows well how to make one, but she has not one just now."

"Well, I must believe you, Master Humphrey," replied the Intendant.—"And now, my dear child, we must think of going, for it is a long ride, and the little girl is not used to a horse."

"Mistress Alice, many thanks for your hospitality; and now, farewell.—Edith, good-bye, dear.—Now, Clara, are you quite ready?"

They all went out of the cottage. The Intendant put Clara on the pony after she had kissed Alice and Edith. Edward assisted Patience; and when she was mounted she said,—

"I hope you will accept my father's offer; you will oblige me so much if you do."

"I will give it every consideration it deserves," replied Edward. "Indeed, it will depend more upon my brother than myself whether I accept it or not."

"Your brother is a very sensible young man, sir, therefore I have hopes," replied Patience.

"A quality which it appears you do not give me credit for, Miss Heatherstone."

"Not when pride or vindictive feelings obtain the mastery," replied she.

"Perhaps you will find that I am not quite so proud, or bear such ill-will, as I did when I first saw your father, Miss Heatherstone; and some allowance should be made, even if I did show such feelings, when you consider that I was brought up at Arnwood."

"True—most true, Master Armitage. I had no right to speak so boldly, especially to you, who risked your own life to save the daughter of one of those Round-heads who treated the family of your protector so cruelly. You must forgive me; and now, farewell!"

Edward bowed, and then turned to the Intendant, who had apparently been waiting while the conversation was going on. The Intendant bade him a cordial farewell; Edward shook Clara by the hand, and the cavalcade set off. They all remained outside of the cottage till the party were at some distance, and then Edward walked apart with Humphrey, to communicate to him the offer made by the Intendant, and asked his opinion.

"My opinion is made up, Edward; which is, that you should accept it immediately. You are under no obligation to the Government, and you have already conferred such an obligation upon the Intendant that you have a right to expect a return. Why stay here, when you can safely mix with the world and know how

things are going on? I do not require your assistance, now that I have Pablo, who is more useful every day. Do not lose such an opportunity of making a friend for yourself and all of us—a protector, I may say; and who is, by what he has confided to you, anything but approving of the conduct of the present Government. He has paid you a deserved compliment by saying that he can and will trust you. You must not refuse the offer, Edward; it would really be folly if you did.”

“I believe you are right, Humphrey; but I have been so accustomed to range the forest—I am so fond of the chase—I am so impatient of control or confinement, that I hardly know how to decide. A secretary’s life is anything but pleasing to me, sitting at a table writing and reading all day long. The pen is but a poor exchange for the long-barrelled gun.”

“It does more execution, nevertheless,” replied Humphrey, “if what I have read is true. But you are not to suppose that your life will be such a sedentary one. Did he not say that he would have to trust you with missions of importance? Will you not, by going to London and other places, and mixing with people of importance, be preparing yourself for your proper station in life, which I trust that one day you will resume? And does it follow that, because you are appointed a secretary, you are not to go out in the forest and shoot a deer with Oswald, if you feel inclined—with this difference, that you may do it then without fear of being insulted or persecuted by such a wretch as that Corbould? Do not hesitate any longer, my dear brother; recollect that our sisters ought not to live this forest life as they advance in years—they were not born for it, although they have so well conformed to it. It depends upon you to release them eventually from their false position; and you can never have such an opening as is now

offered you by one whose gratitude alone will make him anxious to serve you."

"You are right, Humphrey, and I will accept the offer. I can but return to you if things do not go on well."

"I thank you sincerely for your decision, Edward," replied Humphrey. "What a sweet girl that Patience Heatherstone is! I think I never saw such an enchanting smile!"

Edward thought of the smile she gave him when they parted but an hour ago, and agreed with Humphrey; but he replied,—

"Why, brother, you are really in love with the Intendant's daughter."

"Not so, my dear fellow; but I am in love with her goodness and sweetness of disposition, and so are Alice and Edith, I can tell you. She has promised to come over and see them, and bring them flowers for their garden, and I hardly know what; and I am very glad of it, as my sisters have been buried here so long that they cannot but gain by her company now and then. No! I will leave Mistress Heatherstone for you; I am in love with little Clara."

"Not a bad choice, Humphrey: we both aspire high, for two young foresters; do we not? However, they say 'every dog has his day,' and Cromwell and his Parliament may have theirs. King Charles may be on his throne again now, long before—you catch a forest pony, Humphrey."

"I hope he will, Edward; but recollect how you laughed at the idea of my catching a cow—you may be surprised a second time. 'Where there is a will there is a way,' the saying is. But I must go and help Alice with the heifer; she is not very quiet yet, and I see her going out with her pail."

The brothers then parted, and Edward walked about, turning over in his mind the events of the day, and very often finding his thoughts broken in upon by sudden visions of Patience Heatherstone; and certainly the remembrance of her was to him the most satisfactory and pleasing portion of the prospect in his offered situation.

"I shall live with her, and be continually in her company," thought he. "Well, I would take a less pleasing office if only for that. She requested me to accept it to oblige her, and I will do so. How hasty we are in our conclusions! When I first saw her father, what an aversion I felt for him! Now, the more I know him the more I like him—nay, more, respect him. He said that the King wished to be absolute and wrest the liberties from his subjects, and that they were justified in opposing him; I never heard that when at Arnwood.

"If so, was it lawful so to do?"

"I think it was, but not to murder him—that I can never admit, nor does the Intendant; on the contrary, he holds his murderers in as great detestation as I do. Why, then, we do not think far apart from one another. At the commencement the two parties were—those who supported him, not admitting that he was right, but too loyal to refuse to fight for their King; and those who opposed, hoping to force him to do right: the King for his supposed prerogatives, the people for their liberties. The King was obstinate, the people resolute, until virulent warfare inflamed both parties, and neither would listen to reason; and the people gained the upper hand, they wreaked their vengeance, instead of looking to the dictates of humanity and justice. How easy it had been to have deposed him and sent him beyond the seas! Instead of which they detained him a

prisoner and then murdered him. The punishment was greater than the offence, and dictated by malice and revenge; it was a diabolical act, and will soil the page of our nation's history." So thought Edward as he paced before the cottage, until he was summoned in by Pablo to their evening meal.