

CHAPTER III.

THE next morning, as soon as Jacob had given the children their breakfast, he set off towards Arnwood. He knew that Benjamin had stated his intention to return with the horse and see what had taken place, and he knew him well enough to feel sure that he would do so. He thought it better to see him, if possible, and ascertain the fate of Miss Judith. Jacob arrived at the still smoking ruins of the mansion, and found several people there, mostly residents within a few miles, some attracted by curiosity, others busy in collecting the heavy masses of lead which had been melted from the roof, and appropriating them to their own benefit; but much of it was still too hot to be touched, and they were throwing snow on it to cool it, for it had snowed during the night. At last, Jacob perceived Benjamin on horseback riding leisurely towards him, and immediately went up to him.

“ Well, Benjamin, this is a woeful sight. What is the news from Lymington? ”

“ Lymington is full of troopers, and they are not over civil,” replied Benjamin.

“ And the old lady—where is she? ”

“ Ah, that’s a sad business,” replied Benjamin, “ and the poor children, too. Poor Master Edward! he would have made a brave gentleman.”

"But the old lady is safe?" rejoined Jacob. "Did you see her?"

"Yes, I saw her; they thought she was King Charles—poor old soul."

"But they have found out their mistake by this time?"

"Yes, and James Southwold has found it out too," replied Benjamin; "to think of the old lady breaking his neck!"

"Breaking his neck? You don't say so! How was it?"

"Why, it seems that Southwold thought that she was King Charles dressed up as an old woman, so he seized her and strapped her fast behind him, and galloped away with her to Lymington; but she struggled and kicked so manfully, that he could not hold on, and off they went together, and he broke his neck."

"Indeed!—a judgment—a judgment upon a traitor," said Jacob.

"They were picked up, strapped together as they were, by the other troopers, and carried to Lymington."

"Well, and where is the old lady, then? Did you see and speak to her?"

"I saw her, Jacob, but I did not speak to her. I forgot to say, that when she broke Southwold's neck she broke her own too."

"Then the old lady is dead?"

"Yes, that she is," replied Benjamin; "but who cares about her? It's the poor children that I pity. Martha has been crying ever since."

"I don't wonder."

"I was at the Cavalier, and the troopers were there, and they were boasting of what they had done, and called it a righteous work. I could not stand that, and I asked one

of them if it were a righteous work to burn poor children in their beds? So he turned round, and struck his sword upon the floor, and asked me whether I was one of them.

Who are you then? ' and I—all my courage went away, and I answered I was a poor rat-catcher. ' A rat-catcher; are you?—Well then, Mr. Ratcatcher, when you are killing rats, if you find a nest of young ones, don't you kill them too? or do you leave them to grow, and become mischievous, eh? ' ' I kill the young ones, of course,' replied I. ' Well, so do we Malignants wherever we find them.' I didn't say a word more, so I went out of the house as fast as I could."

" Have you heard anything about the King? " inquired Jacob.

" No, nothing; but the troopers are all out again, and I hear are gone to the forest."

" Well, Benjamin, good-bye; I shall be off from this part of the country—it's no use my staying here. Where's Agatha and cook? "

" They came to Lymington early this morning."

" Wish them good-bye for me, Benjamin."

" Where are you going then? "

" I can't exactly say, but I think London way. I only stayed here to watch over the children; and now that they are gone, I shall leave Arnwood for ever."

Jacob, who was anxious, on account of the intelligence he had received of the troopers being in the forest, to return to the cottage, shook hands with Benjamin, and hastened away. " Well," thought Jacob, as he wended his way, " I'm sorry 'or the poor old lady; but still, perhaps, it's all for the best. Who knows what they might do with these children!—Destroy the nest as well as the rats, indeed!—they must find the nest first." And the old forester continued his journey, in deep thought.

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We may here observe that, bloodthirsty as many of the Levellers were, we do not think that Jacob Armitage had grounds for the fears which he expressed and felt; that is to say, we believe that he might have made known the existence of the children to the Villiers family, and that they would never have been harmed by anybody. That by the burning of the mansion they might have perished in the flames had they been in bed, as they would have been at that hour, had he not obtained intelligence of what was about to be done, is true, but that there was any danger to them on account of their father having been such a staunch supporter of the King's cause is very unlikely, and not borne out by the history of the times; but the old forester thought otherwise. He had a hatred of the Puritans, and their deeds had been so exaggerated by rumour that he fully believed that the lives of the children were not safe. Under this conviction, and feeling himself bound by his promise to Colonel Beverley to protect them, Jacob resolved that they should live with him in the forest, and be brought up as his own grandchildren. He knew that there could be no better place for concealment; for, except the keepers, few people knew where his cottage was; and it was so out of the usual paths, and so embosomed in lofty trees, that there was little chance of its being seen, or being known to exist. He resolved, therefore, that they should remain with him till better times; and then he would make known their existence to the other branches of the family, but not before. "I can hunt for them, and provide for them," thought he, "and I have a little money when it is required; and I will teach them to be useful—they must learn to provide for themselves. There's the garden, and the patch of land: in two or three years the boys will be able to do something. I can't teach them much, but I can teach them to fear

God. We must get on how we can, and put our trust in Him who is a Father to the fatherless."

With such thoughts running in his head, Jacob arrived at the cottage, and found the children outside the door, watching for him. They all hastened to him, and the dog rushed before them to welcome his master. "Down, Smoker, good dog! Well, Mr. Edward, I have been as quick as I can. How have Mr. Humphrey and your sisters behaved? But we must not remain outside to-day, for the troopers are scouring the forest, and may see you. Let us come in directly; for it would not do that they should come here."

"Will they burn the cottage down?" inquired Alice, as she took Jacob's hand.

"Yes, my dear, I think they would, if they found that you and your brothers were in it; but we must not let them see you."

They all entered the cottage, which consisted of one large room in front, and two back rooms for bedrooms. There was also a third bedroom, which was behind the other two, but which had not any furniture in it.

"Now let's see what we can have for dinner—thee's venison left, I know," said Jacob. "Come, we must all be useful. Who will be cook?"

"I will be cook," said Alice, "if you will show me how."

"So you shall, my dear," said Jacob, "and I will show you how. There's some potatoes in the basket in the corner—and some onions hanging on the string. We must have some water—who will fetch it?"

"I will," said Edward, who took up a pail, and went out to the spring.

The potatoes were peeled and washed by the children—Jacob and Edward cut the venison into pieces—the iron

pot was cleaned—and then the meat and potatoes put with water into the pot, and placed on the fire.

“Now I’ll cut up the onions, for they will make your eyes water.”

“I don’t care,” said Humphrey, “I’ll cut and cry at the same time.”

And Humphrey took up a knife, and cut away most manfully, although he was obliged to wipe his eyes with his sleeve very often.

“You are a fine fellow, Humphrey,” said Jacob. “Now we’ll put the onions in, and let it all boil up together. Now, you see you have cooked your own dinner; ain’t that pleasant?”

“Yes,” cried they all; “and we will eat our own dinners as soon as it is ready.”

“Then, Humphrey, you must get some of the platters down which are on the dresser; and, Alice, you will find some knives in the drawer. And let me see, what can little Edith do? Oh, she can go to the cupboard and find the salt-cellar. Edward, just look out, and if you see anybody coming or passing, let me know. We must put you on guard till the troopers leave the forest.”

The children set about their tasks, and Humphrey cried out, as he very often did, “Now, this is jolly!”

While the dinner was cooking, Jacob amused the children by showing them how to put things in order; the floor was swept, the hearth was made tidy. He showed Alice how to wash out a cloth, and Humphrey how to dust the chairs. They all worked merrily, while little Edith stood and clapped her hands.

But just before dinner was ready, Edward came in and said, “Here are troopers galloping in the forest!” Jacob went out, and observed that they were coming in a direction that would lead them near to the cottage.

He walked in, and after a moment's thought he said—
 "My dear children, those men may come and search the cottage; you must do as I tell you, and mind that you are very quiet. Humphrey, you and your sisters must go to bed, and pretend to be very ill. Edward, take off your coat and put on this old hunting-frock of mine; you must be in the bedroom attending your sick brother and sisters. Come, Edith, dear, you must play at going to bed, and have your dinner afterwards."

Jacob took the children into the bedroom, and removing the upper dress, which would have betrayed that they were not the children of poor people, put them in bed, and covered them up to the chins with the clothes. Edward had put on the old hunting-shirt, which came below his knees, and stood with a mug of water in his hand by the bedside of the two girls. Jacob went to the outer room, to remove the platters laid out for dinner; and he had hardly done so, when he heard the noise of the troopers, and soon afterwards a knock at the cottage-door.

"Come in," said Jacob.

"Who are you, my friend?" said the leader of the troop, entering the door.

"A poor forester, sir," replied Jacob, "under great trouble."

"What trouble, my man?"

"I have the children all in bed, with the small-pox."

"Nevertheless, we must search your cottage."

"You are welcome," replied Jacob; "only don't frighten the children if you can help it."

The man, who was now joined by others, commenced his search. Jacob opened all the doors of the rooms, and they passed through. Little Edith shrieked when she saw them; but Edward patted her, and told her not to be frightened. The troopers, however, took no notice of the

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children; they searched thoroughly, and then came back to the front room.

"It's no use remaining here," said one of the troopers. "Shall we be off? I'm tired and hungry with the ride."

"So am I; and there's something that smells well," said another. "What's this, my good man?" continued he, taking off the lid of the pot.

"My dinner for a week," replied Jacob. "I have no one to cook for me now, and can't light a fire every day."

"Well, you appear to live well, if you have such a mess as that every day in the week. I should like to try a spoonful or two."

"And welcome, sir," replied Jacob; "I will cook some more for myself."

The troopers took him at his word; they sat down to the table, and very soon the whole contents of the kettle had disappeared. Having satisfied themselves, they got up, told him that his rations were so good that they hoped to call again, and, laughing heartily, they mounted their horses and rode away.

"Well," said Jacob, "they are very welcome to the dinner; I little thought to get off so cheap." As soon as they were out of sight, Jacob called to Edward and the children to get up again, which they soon did. Alice put on Edith's frock, Humphrey put on his jacket, and Edward pulled off the hunting-shirt.

"They're gone now," said Jacob, coming in from the door.

"And our dinners are gone," said Humphrey, looking at the empty pot and dirty platters.

"Yes; but we can cook another: and that will be more play, you know," said Jacob. "Edward, go for the water; Humphrey, cut the onions; Alice, wash the

potatoes; and, Edith, help everybody, while I cut up some more meat."

"I hope it will be as good," observed Humphrey; "that other did smell so nice!"

"Quite as good, if not better; for we shall improve by practice, and we shall have a better appetite to eat it with," said Jacob.

"Nasty men eat our dinner," said Edith. "Shan't have any more. Eat this ourselves."

And so they did as soon as it was cooked; but they were very hungry before they sat down.

"This is jolly!" said Humphrey, with his mouth full.

"Yes, Master Humphrey. I doubt if King Charles eats so good a dinner this day. Mr. Edward, you are very grave and silent."

"Yes, I am, Jacob. Have I not cause? Oh! if I could but have mauled those troopers!"

"But you could not, so you must make the best of it. They say that every dog has his day, and who knows but King Charles may be on the throne again!"

There were no more visits to the cottage that day, and they all went to bed and slept soundly.

The next morning, Jacob, who was most anxious to learn the news, saddled the pony, having first given his injunctions to Edward how to behave in case any troopers should come to the cottage. He told him to pretend that the children were in bed with the small-pox, as they had done the day before. Jacob then travelled to Gossip Allwood's, and he there learnt that King Charles had been taken prisoner, and was at the Isle of Wight, and that the troopers were all going back to London as fast as they came. Feeling that there was now no more danger to be apprehended from them, Jacob set off as fast as he could for Lymington. He went to one shop and pur

chased two peasant dresses which he thought would fit the two boys, and at another he bought similar apparel for the two girls. Then with several other ready-made articles, and some other things which were required for the household, he made a large package, which he put upon the pony, and taking the bridle, set off home, and arrived in time to superintend the cooking of the dinner, which was this day venison steaks fried in a pan and boiled potatoes.

When dinner was over, he opened his bundle, and told the little ones that now they were to live in a cottage they ought to wear cottage clothes, and that he had brought them some to put on, in which they might rove about the woods, and not mind tearing them. Alice and Edith went into the bedroom, and Alice dressed Edith and herself, and came out quite pleased with their change of dress. Humphrey and Edward put theirs on in the sitting-room, and they all fitted pretty well, and certainly were very becoming to the children.

“Now, recollect, you are all my grandchildren,” said Jacob; “for I shall no longer call you Miss and Master—that we never do in a cottage. You understand me, Edward, of course?” added Jacob.

Edward nodded his head, and Jacob telling the children that they might now go out of the cottage and play, they all set off, quite delighted with clothes which procured them their liberty.

We must now describe the cottage of Jacob Armitage, in which the children have in future to dwell. As we said before, it contained a large sitting-room, or kitchen, in which were a spacious hearth and chimney, table, stools, cupboards, and dressers; the two bedrooms which adjoined it were now appropriated, one for Jacob, and the other for the two boys; the third, or inner bedroom, was

arranged for the two girls, as being more retired and secure. But there were outhouses belonging to it; a stall, in which White Billy, the pony, lived during the winter; a shed and pigsty rudely constructed, with an inclosed yard attached to them; and it had, moreover, a piece of ground of more than an acre, well fenced in to keep out the deer and game, the largest portion of which was cultivated as a garden and potato-ground, and the other, which remained in grass, contained some fine old apple and pear trees. Such was the domicile. The pony, a few fowls, a sow and two young pigs, and the dog Smoker, were the animals on the establishment. Here Jacob Armitage had been born—for the cottage had been built by his grandfather—but he had not always remained at the cottage. When young, he felt an inclination to see more of the world, and had for several years served in the army. His father and brother had lived in the establishment at Arnwood, and he was constantly there as a boy. The chaplain of Arnwood had taken a fancy to him, and taught him to read—writing he had not acquired. As soon as he grew up, he served, as we have said, in the troop commanded by Colonel Beverley's father; and after his death, Colonel Beverley had procured him the situation of forest ranger, which had been held by his father, who was then alive, but too aged to do the duty. Jacob Armitage married a good and devout young woman, with whom he lived several years, when she died, without bringing him any family; after which, his father being also dead, Jacob Armitage had lived alone until the period at which we have commenced this history.