

CHAPTER IV.

THE old forester lay awake the whole of this night, reflecting how he should act relative to the children; he felt the great responsibility that he had incurred, and was alarmed when he considered what might be the consequences if his days were shortened. What would become of them—living in so sequestered a spot that few knew even of its existence—totally shut out from the world, and left to their own resources? He had no fear, if his life was spared, that they would do well; but if he should be called away before they had grown up and were able to help themselves, they might perish. Edward was not fourteen years old. It was true that he was an active, brave boy, and thoughtful for his years; but he had not yet strength or skill sufficient for what would be required. Humphrey, the second, also promised well; but still they were all children. “I must bring them up to be useful—to depend upon themselves; there is not a moment to be lost, and not a moment shall be lost; I will do my best, and trust to God. I ask but two or three years, and by that time I trust that they will be able to do without me. They must commence to-morrow, the life of forester’s children.”

Acting upon this resolution, Jacob, as soon as the children were dressed and in the sitting-room, opened his Bible, which he had put on the table, and said,—

“ My dear children, you know that you must remain in this cottage, that the wicked troopers may not find you out; they killed your father, and if I had not taken you away they would have burnt you in your beds. You must therefore live here as my children, and you must call yourselves by the name of Armitage, and not that of Beverley; and you must dress like children of the forest, as you do now, and you must do as children of the forest do—that is, you must do everything for yourselves, for you can have no servants to wait upon you. We must all work; but you will like to work if you all work together, for then the work will be nothing but play. Now, Edward is the oldest, and he must go out with me in the forest, and I must teach him to kill deer and other game for our support; and when he knows how, then Humphrey shall come out and learn how to shoot.”

“ Yes,” said Humphrey, “ I’ll soon learn.”

“ But not yet, Humphrey, for you must do some work in the meantime; you must look after the pony and the pigs, and you must learn to dig in the garden with Edward and me when we do not go out to hunt; and sometimes I shall go by myself, and leave Edward to work with you when there is work to be done. Alice, dear, you must, with Humphrey, light the fire and clean the house in the morning. Humphrey will go to the spring for water, and do all the hard work; and you must learn to wash, my dear Alice—I will show you how; and you must learn to get dinner ready with Humphrey, who will assist you; and to make the beds. And little Edith shall take care of the fowls, and feed them every morning, and look for the eggs—will you, Edith? ”

“ Yes,” replied Edith, “ and feed all the little chickens when they are hatched, as I did at Arnwood.”

“ Yes, dear, and you’ll be very useful. Now you know

that you cannot do all this at once. You will have to try and try again; but very soon you will, and then it will be all play. I must teach you all, and every day you will do it better, till you want no teaching at all. And now, my dear children, as there is no chaplain here, we must read the Bible every morning. Edward can read, I know; can you, Humphrey?"

"Yes, all except the big words."

"Well, you will learn them by-and-by. And Edward and I will teach Alice and Edith to read in the evenings, when we have nothing to do. It will be an amusement. Now, tell me, do you all like what I have told you?"

"Yes," they all replied; and then Jacob Armitage read a chapter in the Bible, after which they all knelt down and said the Lord's Prayer. As this was done every morning and every evening, I need not repeat it again. Jacob then showed them again how to clean the house, and Humphrey and Alice soon finished their work under his directions; and then they all sat down to breakfast, which was a very plain one, being generally cold meat, and cakes baked on the embers, at which Alice was soon very expert; and little Edith was very useful in watching them for her, while she busied herself about her other work. But the venison was nearly all gone; and after breakfast Jacob and Edward, with the dog Smoker, went out into the woods. Edward had no gun, as he only went out to be taught how to approach the game, which required great caution; indeed Jacob had no second gun to give him, if he had wished so to do.

"Now, Edward, we are going after a fine stag, if we can find him—which I doubt not—but the difficulty is to get within shot of him. Recollect that you must always be hid, for his sight is very quick; never be heard, for his ear is sharp; and never come down to him with the wind,

for his scent is very fine. Then you must hunt according to the hour of the day. At this time he is feeding; two hours hence he will be lying down in the high fern. The dog is of no use unless the stag is badly wounded, when the dog will take him. Smoker knows his duty well, and will hide himself as close as we do. We are now going into the thick wood ahead of us, as there are many little spots of cleared ground in it where we may find the deer; but we must keep more to the left, for the wind is to the eastward, and we must walk up against it. And now that we are coming into the wood, recollect not a word must be said, and you must walk quietly as possible, keeping behind me.—Smoker, to heel!" They proceeded through the wood for more than a mile when Jacob made a sign to Edward and dropped down into the fern, crawling along to an open spot, where, at some distance, were a stag and three deer grazing. The deer grazed quietly, but the stag was ever and anon raising up his head and snuffing the air as he looked round, evidently acting as a sentinel for the females.

The stag was perhaps a long quarter of a mile from where they had crouched down in the fern. Jacob remained immovable till the animal began to feed again, and then he advanced crawling through the fern, followed by Edward and the dog, who dragged himself on his stomach after Edward. This tedious approach was continued for some time, and they had neared the stag to within half the original distance; when the animal again lifted up his head and appeared uneasy. Jacob stopped and remained without motion. After a time the stag walked away, followed by the does, to the opposite side of the clear spot on which they had been feeding, and, to Edward's annoyance, the animal was now half a mile from them. Jacob turned round and crawled into the wood,

and when he knew that they were concealed, he rose on his feet and said,—

“ You see, Edward, that it requires patience to stalk a deer. What a princely fellow! but he has probably been alarmed this morning, and is very uneasy. Now we must go through the woods till we come to the lee of him on the other side of the dell. You see he has led the does close to the thicket, and we shall have a better chance when we get there, if we are only quiet and cautious.”

“ What startled him, do you think? ” said Edward.

“ I think, when you were crawling through the fern after me, you broke a piece of rotten stick that was under you, did you not? ”

“ Yes, but that made but little noise.”

“ Quite enough to startle a red deer, Edward, as you will find out before you have been long a forester. These checks will happen, and have happened to me a hundred times, and then all the work is to be done over again. Now then to make a circuit—we had better not say a word. If we get safe now to the other side, we are sure of him.”

They proceeded at a quick walk through the forest, and in half an hour had gained the side where the deer were feeding. When about three hundred yards from the game Jacob again sank down on his hands and knees, crawling from bush to bush, stopping whenever the stag raised his head, and advancing again when it resumed feeding. At last they came to the fern at the side of the wood, and crawled through it as before, but still more cautiously as they approached the stag. In this manner they arrived at last to within eighty yards of the animal, and then Jacob advanced his gun ready to put it to his shoulder, and as he cocked the lock, raised himself to fire. The click occasioned by the cocking of the lock roused up the

stag instantly, and he turned his head in the direction from whence the noise proceeded. As he did so, Jacob fired, aiming behind the animal's shoulder; the stag made a bound, came down again, dropped on his knees, attempted to run, and fell dead, while the does fled away with the rapidity of the wind.

Edward started up on his legs with a shout of exultation. Jacob commenced reloading his gun, and stopped Edward as he was about to run up to where the animal lay.

"Edward, you must learn your craft," said Jacob; "never do that again; never shout in that way. On the contrary, you should have remained still in the fern."

"Why so? the stag is dead."

"Yes, my dear boy, that stag is dead; but how do you know but what there may be another lying down in the fern close to us, or at some distance from us, which you have alarmed by your shout? Suppose that we both had had guns, and that the report of mine had started another stag lying in the fern within shot, you would have been able to shoot it; or if a stag was lying at a distance, the report of the gun might have startled him so as to induce him to move his head without rising. I should have seen his antlers move and have marked his lair, and we should then have gone after him and stalked him too."

"I see," replied Edward, "I was wrong; but I shall know better another time."

"That's why I tell you, my boy," replied Jacob; "now let us go to our quarry. Ay, Edward, this is a noble beast. I thought that he was a hart royal, and so he is."

"What is a hart royal, Jacob?"

"Why, a stag is called a brocket until he is three years old; at four years he is a staggart; at five years a warrantable stag; and after five years he becomes a hart royal."

“ And how do you know his age? ”

“ By his antlers. You see that this stag has nine antlers; now, a brocket has but two antlers, a staggart three, and a warrantable stag but four; at six years old, the antlers increase in number until they sometimes have twenty or thirty. This is a fine beast, and the venison is now getting very good. Now you must see me do the work of my craft.”

Jacob then cut the throat of the animal, and afterwards cut off its head, and took out its bowels.

“ Are you tired, Edward? ” said Jacob, as he wiped his hunting-knife on the coat of the stag.

“ No, not the least.”

“ Well, then, we are now, I should think, about four or five miles from the cottage. Could you find your way home? But that is of no consequence, Smoker will lead you home by the shortest path. I will stay here, and you can saddle White Billy and come back with him, for he must carry the venison back. It's more than we can manage—indeed, as much as we can manage with White Billy to help us. There's more than twenty stone of venison lying there, I can tell you.”

Edward immediately assented, and Jacob, desiring Smoker to go home, set about flaying and cutting up the animal for its more convenient transportation. In an hour and a half, Edward, attended by Smoker, returned with the pony, on whose back the chief portion of the venison was packed. Jacob took a large piece on his own shoulders, and Edward carried another, and Smoker, after regaling himself with a portion of the inside of the animal, came after them. During the walk home, Jacob initiated Edward into the terms of venery and many other points connected with deer-stalking, with which we shall not trouble our readers. As soon as they arrived at

the cottage, the venison was hung up, the pony put in the stable, and then they sat down to dinner with an excellent appetite after their long morning's walk. Alice and Humphrey had cooked the dinner themselves, and it was in the pot, smoking hot, when they returned; and Jacob declared he never ate a better mess in his life. Alice was not a little proud of this, and of the praises she received from Edward and the old forester. The next day Jacob stated his intention of going to Lymington to dispose of a large portion of the venison, and bring back a sack of oatmeal for their cakes. Edward asked to accompany him, but Jacob replied,—

“Edward, you must not think of showing yourself at Lymington, or anywhere else, for a long while, until you are grown out of memory. It would be folly, and you would risk your sisters' and brother's lives, perhaps, as well as your own. Never mention it again: the time will come when it will be necessary perhaps; if so, it cannot be helped. At present you would be known immediately. No, Edward, I tell you what I do mean to do: I have a little money left, and I intend to buy you a gun, that you may learn to stalk deer yourself without me; for recollect if any accident should happen to me, who is there but you to provide for your brother and sisters? At Lymington I am known to many, but out of all who know me there is not one who knows where my cottage is; they know that I live in the New Forest, and that I supply them venison, and purchase other articles in return. That is all that they know; and I may therefore go without fear. I shall sell the venison to-morrow, and bring you back a good gun; and Humphrey shall have the carpenter's tools which he wishes for—for I think, by what he does with his knife, that he has a turn that way, and it may be useful. I must also get some other tools for Humphrey and you,

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as we then shall be able to work all together; and some threads and needles for Alice, for she can sew a little, and practice will make her more perfect."

Jacob went off to Lymington as he had proposed, and returned late at night with White Billy well loaded: he had a sack of oatmeal, some spades and hoes, a saw and chisels, and other tools; two scythes and two three-pronged forks; and when Edward came to meet him, he put into his hand a gun with a very long barrel.

"I believe, Edward, that you will find that a good one, for I know where it came from. It belonged to one of the rangers, who was reckoned the best shot in the forest. I know the gun, for I have seen it on his arm, and have taken it in my hand to examine it, more than once. He was killed at Naseoy, with your father, poor fellow! and his widow sold the gun to meet her wants."

"Well!" replied Edward, "I thank you much, Jacob, and I will try if I cannot kill as much venison as will pay back the purchase-money—I will, I assure you."

"I shall be glad if you do, Edward; not because I want the money back, but because then I shall be more easy in my mind about you all if anything happens to me. As soon as you are perfect in your woodcraft, I shall take Humphrey in hand, for there is nothing like having two strings to your bow. To-morrow we will not go out: we have meat enough for three weeks or more; and now the frost has set in, it will keep well. You shall practise at a mark with your gun, that you may be accustomed to it; for all guns, even the best, require a little humouring."

Edward, who had often fired a gun before, proved the next morning that he had a very good eye, and after two or three hours' practice, hit the mark at a hundred yards almost every time.

"I wish you would let me go out by myself," said Edward, overjoyed at his success.

"You would bring home nothing, boy," replied Jacob. "No, no, you have a great deal to learn yet. But I tell you what you shall do: any time that we are not in great want of venison; you shall have the first fire."

"Well, that will do," replied Edward.

The winter now set in with great severity, and they remained almost altogether within doors. Jacob and the boys went out to get firewood, and dragged it home through the snow.

"I wish, Jacob," said Humphrey, "that I was able to build a cart, for it would be very useful, and White Billy would then have something to do; but I can't make the wheels, and there is no harness."

"That's not a bad idea of yours, Humphrey," replied Jacob; "we will think about it. If you can't build a cart, perhaps I can buy one. It would be useful if it were only to take the dung out of the yard on to the potato-ground; for I have hitherto carried it out in baskets, and it's hard work."

"Yes, and we might saw the wood into billets, and carry it home in the cart instead of dragging it this way: my shoulder is quite sore with the rope, it cuts me so."

"Well, when the weather breaks up, I will see what I can do, Humphrey; but just now the roads are so blocked up that I do not think we could get a cart from Lymington to the cottage, although we can a horse, perhaps."

But if they remained indoors during the inclement weather, they were not idle. Jacob took this opportunity to instruct the children in everything. Alice learnt how to wash and how to cook. It is true that sometimes she scalded herself a little, sometimes burnt her fingers; and other accidents did occur, from the articles employed

being too heavy for them to lift by themselves; but practice and dexterity compensated for want of strength, and fewer accidents happened every day. Humphrey had his carpenter's tools; and although at first he had many failures, and wasted nails and wood, by degrees he learnt to use his tools with more dexterity, and made several little useful articles. Little Edith could now do something, for she made and baked all the oatmeal cakes, which saved Alice a good deal of time and trouble in watching them. It was astonishing how much the children could do now there was no one to do it for them; and they had daily instruction from Jacob. In the evening Alice sat down with her needle and thread to mend the clothes. At first they were not very well done, but she improved every day. Edith and Humphrey learnt to read while Alice worked, and then Alice learnt; and thus the winter passed away so rapidly that, although they had been five months at the cottage, it did not appear as if they had been there as many weeks. All were happy and contented, with the exception, perhaps, of Edward, who had fits of gloominess, and occasionally showed signs of impatience as to what was passing in the world, of which he remained in ignorance.

That Edward Beverley had fits of gloominess and impatience is not surprising. Edward had been brought up as the heir of Arnwood; and a boy at a very early age imbibes notions of his position, if it promises to be a high one. He was not two miles from that property which by right was his own. His own mansion had been reduced to ashes, he himself was hidden in the forest, and he could not but feel his position. He sighed for the time when the King's cause should be again triumphant, and his arrival at that age when he could in person support and uphold the cause. He longed to be in command, as his

father had been—to lead his men on to victory—to recover his property, and to revenge himself on those who had acted so cruelly towards him. This was human nature; and much as Jacob Armitage would expostulate with him, and try to divert his feelings into other channels, long as he would preach to him about forgiveness of injuries, and patience until better times should come, Edward could not help brooding over these thoughts, and if ever there was a breast animated with intense hatred against the Puritans, it was that of Edward Beverley. Although this was to be lamented, it could not create surprise or wonder in the old forester. All he could do was as much as possible to reason with him, to soothe his irritated feelings, and by constant employment try to make him forget for a time the feelings of ill-will which he had conceived.

One thing was, however, sufficiently plain to Edward, which was, that whatever might be his wrongs, he had not the power at present to redress them; and this feeling, perhaps, more than any other, held him in some sort of check; and as the time when he might have an opportunity appeared far distant, even to his own sanguine imagination, so by degrees did he contrive to dismiss from his thoughts what it was no use to think about at present.