

## BLEAK MARCH IN EPPING FOREST

All along the selvage of Epping Forest there was excitement. Before the swallows, before the violets, long before the cuckoo, with only untimely honeysuckle bushes showing a trace of green, two trippers had been seen traversing the district, making their way towards High Beech, and settling awhile near the Forest Hotel. Whether they were belated survivals from last season or exceptionally early hatchings of the coming year, was a question of considerable moment to the natives, and has since engaged the attention of the local Natural History Society. But we know that, as a matter of fact, they were of little omen, being indeed but insignificant people from Hampstead and not true trippers at all, who were curious to see this forest in raw winter.

For some have argued that there is no Epping Forest at all in the winter-time; that it is, in fact, taken up and put away, and that agriculture is pursued there. Others assert that the Forest is shrouded with wrappers, even as a literary man's study is shrouded by dusty women when they clean him out. Others, again, have supposed that it is a delightful place in winter, far more delightful than in summer, but that this is not published, because no writing man hath ever been there in the cold season. And much more of unreal speculation, but nothing which bore upon it the stamp of truth. So these two--and I am one of the two--went down to Epping Forest to see that it was still there, and how it fared in the dismal weather.

The sky was a greasy grey that guttered down to the horizon, and the wind smote damp and chill. There was a white fringe of ice in the cart-wheel ruts, but withal the frost was not so crisp as to prevent a thin and slippery glaze of softened clay upon the road. The decaying triumphal arch outside the station sadly lacked a coat of paint, and was indistinctly regretful of remote royal visits and processions gone for ever. Then we passed shuddering by many vacant booths that had once resounded with the revelry of ninepenny teas and the gingerbeer cork's staccato, and their forms were piled together and their trestles overturned. And the wind ravened, and no human beings were to be seen. So up the hill to the left, and along the road leading by devious windings between the black hedges and through clay wallows to the hilly part round High Beech.

But upon the shoulder of a hill we turned to a gate to scrape off the mud that made our boots unwieldy. At that moment came a threadbare place in the cloudy curtain that was sweeping across the sun, and our shadows showed themselves for an instant to comfort us. The amber patch of sunlight presently slipped from us and travelled down the meadows towards the distant blue of the hills by Waltham Abbey, touching with miraculous healing a landscape erst dead and shrouded in grey. This transitory gleam of light gladdened us mightily at the time, but it made the after-sky seem all the darker.

So through the steep and tortuous village to High Beech, and then

leaving the road we wandered in among big trees and down slopes ankle deep with rustling leaves towards Chingford again. Here was pleasanter walking than the thawing clay, but now and then one felt the threat of an infinite oozy softness beneath the stiff frozen leaves. Once again while we were here the drifting haze of the sky became thinner, and the smooth green-grey beech stems and rugged oak trunks were brightly illuminated. But only for a moment, and thereafter the sky became not simply unsympathetic but ominous. And the misery of the wind grew apace.

Presently we wandered into that sinister corner of the Forest where the beech trees have grown so closely together that they have had perforce to lift their branches vertically. Divested of leaves, the bare grey limbs of these seem strangely restless. These trees, reaching so eagerly upward, have an odd resemblance to the weird figures of horror in which William Blake delighted--arms, hands, hair, all stretch intensely to the zenith. They seem to be straining away from the spot to which they are rooted. It is a Laocoon grouping, a wordless concentrated struggle for the sunlight, and disagreeably impressive. The trippers longed to talk and were tongue-tied; they looked now and then over their shoulders. They were glad when the eerie influence was passed, though they traversed a morass to get away from it.

Then across an open place, dismal with the dun hulls of lost cows and the clatter of their bells, over a brook full of dead leaves and edged with rusty clay, through a briery thicket that would fain have detained us, and so to a pathway of succulent green, that oozed black under our

feet. Here some poor lost wayfarer has blazed his way with rustic seats, now rheumatic and fungus-eaten. And here, too, the wind, which had sought us howling, found us at last, and stung us sharply with a shower of congealing raindrops. This grew to a steady downfall as the open towards Chingford station was approached at last, after devious winding in the Forest. Then, coming upon the edge of the wood and seeing the lone station against the grey sky, we broke into a shout and began running. But it is dismal running on imperfectly frozen clay, in rain and a gusty wind. We slipped and floundered, and one of us wept sore that she should never see her home again. And worse, the only train sleeping in the station was awakened by our cries, and, with an eldritch shriek at the unseasonable presence of trippers, fled incontinently Londonward.

Smearred with clay and dead leaves almost beyond human likeness, we staggered into the derelict station, and found from an outcast porter that perhaps another train might after the lapse of two hours accumulate sufficiently to take us back to Gospel Oak and a warm world again. So we speered if there were amusements to be got in this place, and he told us "some very nice walks." To refrain from homicide we left the station, and sought a vast red hotel that loomed through the drift on a steep hill, and in the side of this a door that had not been locked. Happily one had been forgotten, and, entering at last, we roused a hibernating waiter, and he exhumed us some of his winter victual. In this way we were presently to some degree comforted, and could play chess until a train had been sent for our relief. And this did at last happen, and

towards the hour of dinner we rejoined our anxious friends, and all the evening time we boasted of a pleasant day and urged them to go even as we had gone.