

trees, over which the unwary occasionally came to grief. Shouts from the top of the hill guided the party to the appointed goal, where were found assembled a considerable body of the freeholders of Loughton, armed with axes. It waited three minutes to 12, but all was ready for the signal. Just as—twelve miles off—the clocks from the steeples of London were chiming the first notes of midnight, here, out on this bleak hillside, a score of axes fell on the boughs of as many trees, each stroke meaning a protest against seignorial innovation, and a declaration of a determination to maintain to the last the centuries-old rights of the people. As the still-green boughs fell to the ground under the rapid strokes of figures dimly seen up in the trees, those below seized branches and waived them about their heads, loudly cheering the woodmen in their task. When the work of "lopping" was done, those who had been engaged in it joined the crowd below, and, each man carrying a green bough on his shoulder, an impromptu procession round the cleared space was organized, the mass of foliage moving in the moonlight suggesting a fresh visit of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane. Amid the cheers there rose a cry of "Bonfire! bonfire!" and in a twinkling the lopped branches were piled in a heap on the ground, and, willing hands bringing heaps of dried fern, a fire was lit, to which the green wood slowly yielded. As the fire spread and grew strong, the boughs were piled up higher and higher, and at 1 o'clock yesterday morning Staple Hill announced to all residents in the surrounding neighborhood who were awake and chanced to look that way that the estovers rights of the people of Loughton had been preserved for another year.

A STORY OF EPPING FOREST.

The London *Daily News* of Nov. 12 contains the following sketch: The right to cut fire-wood in one of the Crown Forests and carry it away without payment of money and without reference to price, is, in view of the rates current on the Coal Exchange, an exceedingly precious privilege; and independent of the principle involved, it is no wonder that the residents of Epping Forrest parishes are at some pains to preserve it. That in order to that end they should remain out of their beds long after the usual hour of retiring, and should assemble on Staple Hill to "lop" the trees as the clock struck 12 on a November night, is a ceremonial for the necessity of which they are told to thank Queen Elizabeth. That sovereign had a residence within the bounds of the forest, near Chingford, the ruins of which, known as Queen Elizabeth's Lodge, remain to this day. It is alleged that, being moved to compassion by the condition of the poor in the neighborhood, the good Queen gave them permission to lop and carry away for their domestic use the branches of the trees that then abundantly grew in the forest. It was part of the bargain that none were to use for the removal of the faggots other conveyance than a hand-sledge, or if a larger cart were brought into requisition, it was to be drawn by a mare, with hind feet shoeless. Finally it was decreed that this gracious charter was to be enjoyed upon the condition of the residents in the parishes commencing to lop the trees on the first stroke of midnight on the 11th of each November, which accomplished, they were to be at liberty to cut and carry off wood throughout the Winter, and up to the 23d day of March. The four parishes contiguous to the Royal Lodge—to wit, Loughton, Theydon Bois, Waltham Abbey, and Epping—were included in this charter; and whether the donor was Queen Elizabeth, of which there does not appear to be much trustworthy evidence, or whether the custom has a still older origin, it is certain that for sometime after the Elizabethan era the privilege described was exercised in each of these four parishes.

But the good Queen had not been in her grave half a century before the popular right of estovers in Epping Forest began to be successfully assailed by the greed of the lords of the manor. In the parish of Waltham Abbey the poor were, according to the venerable Pigbones, cheated in a remarkable manner. On the evening of the 11th of November, 1641, the lord of the manor sent out into all the byways of the Forest, and, with soft speech and friendly entreaty, compelled all the poor of the parish to come in and sup with him. "There never was such an exemplary community as the poor of Waltham Abbey," the wily seigneur said, as he filled their cups and heaped up their platters, and bid them eat, drink, and be merry. But when the clock struck twelve, his manner changed to one of mocking scorn, and the people knew that they had been tricked, and that they had irrevocably sold their birthright for a mess of pottage. In the parish of Epping the privilege of lopping has been practiced within living memory, and here the right was lost in a way more in accordance with later civilization. The lord of the manor being grieved by the untidy appearance of the forest consequent upon the irregular lopping, proposed to his tenants that he should do the fire-wood for them, undertaking not only to do so without charge, but to deliver the faggots at their doors. The tenants accepted the proposal, and for some years the bargain was fairly carried out. But in process of time his Lordship grew lax in the delivery of the wood; next required those in need of it to come and fetch it themselves, and finally refused either to cut it himself or to let the tenants cut it. In Theydon Bois, the popular privilege is still exercised, but in a timid, secret manner, the tenants not feeling strong enough openly to assert their right. The fourth of the endowed parishes—Loughton—nearly lost its right by falling into a trap similar to that which closed over their neighbors at Waltham Abbey. They also were invited to a great supper on a certain 11th of November, and, unable to resist the temptation of unlimited beer and illimitable roast beef, they entered the manorial hall and ranged themselves around the seemingly hospitable board. But happily there was one among them who, to use the homely words of Pigbones, "smelt a rat, and was forewarned to put his foot heavily down on the same." About 11:30, the tenants having well eaten and drunk, "an old man rose, and giving the signal, the poor people rushed forth" out of the hall into the forest, where as the clock struck midnight they applied themselves to the lopping with a lustiness whereto the lord of the manor's beef and beer had in no small degree contributed. When other subjects for historical painters fall short, perhaps this incident in Epping Forest will be remembered. The sudden uproaring from the festive board of the dissembling "old men," the flight of the guests, and the consternation that would probably be manifest upon the countenance of the over-reaching lord of the manor, whom he found himself over-reached, would combine to furnish material for a deeply interesting tableau.

The custom thus preserved remains in force in Loughton to this day, and the earliest moments of yesterday morning were ushered in on Staple Hill amid the sharp sound of the falling ax. Some of the gentlemen who have banded themselves together in the noble enterprise of preserving the people's heritage in Epping Forest determined to be present at the ceremony at midnight on Tuesday, and with that view met at supper, in the Crown Inn, Loughton. Sir Antonio Brady filled the chair. Supper over, thick coats were donned, leggings buttoned on, lanterns lit, and a start made for the trysting-place in the forest, where the trees were marked for lopping. It was at the outset a dark, almost starless, night, with a keen wind blowing promise of a frost. But before half the brief journey had been performed the stars came out, and presently the moon emerged from a bank of clouds, shedding over hill and forest glade a flood of silver light that put to shame the lanterns. There was a spice of excitement in the midnight enterprising, and there was also a great deal of mud in the pathways, occasionally culminating in the small ditches in the vicinity of the gates that had to be passed through. As the pathways neared the top of the hill there was less mud, but there were more treacherous stumps, relics of felled