

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL.

(Continued from p. 307.)

"BROTHER," said John Ball, "how deemest thou of our adventure? I do not ask thee if you thinkest we are right to play the play like men, but whether playing like men we shall fail like men."

"Why dost thou ask me?" said I, "how much further than beyond this church can I see?"

"Far further," quoth he, "for I see that thou art a scholar and hast read books; and withal, in some way that I cannot name, thou knowest more than we; as though with thee the world had lived longer than with us. Hide not, therefore, what thou hast in thine heart, for I think after this night I shall see thee no more, until we meet in the heavenly fellowship."

"Friend," I said, "ask me what thou wilt; or rather ask thou the years to come to tell thee some little of their tale; and yet methinks thou thyself mayst have some deeming thereof."

He raised himself on the elbow of the stall and looked me full in the face, and said to me: "Is it so after all that thou art no man in the flesh, but art sent to me by the Master of the fellowship, and the king's son of heaven to tell me what shall be? If that be so tell me straight out, since I had some deeming hereof before, whereas thy speech is like ours and yet unlike; and thy face hath something in it which is not after the fashion of our day. And yet take heed if thou art such an one, I fear thee not, nay, nor him that sent thee; nor for thy bidding, nor for his, will I turn back from London Bridge but will press on, for I do what is meet and right."

"Nay," said I, "did I not tell thee e'en now that I knew life but not death? I am not dead; and as to who hath sent me, I say not that I am come by my own will; for I know not; yet also I know not the will that hath sent me hither; and this I say to thee, moreover, that if I know more than thou, I do far less; therefore, art thou my captain and I thy minstrel."

He sighed as one from whom a weight had been lifted, and said: "Well, then, since thou art alive on the earth and a man like myself, tell me how deemest thou of our adventure: shall we come to London and how shall we fare there?"

Said I, "What shall hinder you to come to London, and to fare there as ye will? For be sure that the fellowship in Essex shall not fail you; nor shall the Londoners who hate the king's uncles withstand you, nor hath the Court any great force to meet you in the field; ye shall cast fear and trembling into their hearts."

"Even so I thought," said he, "but afterwards what shall betide?"

Said I, "It grieves my heart to say that which I think. Yet hearken; many a man's son shall die who is now alive and happy, and if the soldiers be slain, and of them most not on the field, but by the lawyer, how shall the captains escape? Surely thou goest to thy death."

He smiled very sweetly, yet proudly, as he said: "Yea, the road is long, but the end cometh at last. Friend, many a day have I been dying; for my sister, with whom I have played and been merry in the autumn tide about the edges of the stubble fields; and we gathered the nuts and bramble-berries there, and started thence the missel-thrush, and wondered at his voice and thought him big; and the sparrow-hawk wheeled and turned over the hedges and the weasel ran across the path, and the sound of the sheep-bells came to us from the downs as we sat happy on the grass; and she is dead and gone from the earth, for she pined from famine after the years of the great sickness; and my brother was slain in the French wars, and none thanked him for dying save he that stripped him of his gear; and my unwedded wife with whom I dwelt in love after I had taken the tansure, and all men said that she was good and fair, and true she was and lovely; she also is dead and gone from the earth, and why should I abide save for the deeds of the flesh which must be done? Truly, friend, this is but an old tale that men must die; and I will tell thee another, to wit, that they live; and I live now and shall live. Tell me then what shall befall."

I took less heed of him than I had done, and the voice that came from me was less of me as I answered: "These men are strong and valiant as any that have been or shall be, and good fellows also and kindly; but they are simple and see no great way before their own noses. The victory shall they have and shall not know what to do with it; they shall fight and overcome, because of their lack of knowledge; and because of their lack of knowledge shall they be cozened and betrayed when their captains are slain, and all shall come to nought by seeming; and the king's uncles shall prevail, that both they and the king may come to the shame that is appointed for them. And yet when the lords have vanquished, and all England lieth under them again, yet shall their victory be but fruitless; for the free men that hold unfree lands shall they not bring under the collar again, and villeinage shall slip from their hands, till there be, and not long after you are dead, but few unfree men in England; so that your lives and your deaths both shall bear fruit."

"Said I not," quoth John Ball, "that thou wert a sending from other times? Good is thy message, for the land shall be free. Tell on now."

He spoke eagerly, and I went on somewhat sadly: "The times shall better, though the king and lords shall worsen, the Gilds of Craft shall wax and become mightier; more recourse shall there be of foreign merchants. There shall be plenty in the land and not famine. Where a man now earneth two pennies he shall earn three."

"Yea," said he, "then shall those that labour become strong and stronger, and so soon shall it come about that all men shall work and none make to work, and so shall none be robbed, and at last shall men labour and live and be happy, and have the goods of the earth without money and without price."

"Yea," said I, "that shall indeed come to pass, but not yet for a while." And I sat for long without speaking, and the church grew darker as the moon waned yet more. Then I said: "Bethink thee that these men shall yet have masters over them, who have at hand many a law and custom for the behoof of masters, and being masters can make yet more laws in the same behoof; and they shall suffer poor people to thrive just so long as their thriving shall profit the mastership and no longer; and so shall it be in those days I tell of; for there shall be king and lords and knights and squires still, with servants to do their bidding, and make honest men afraid; and all these will make nothing and eat much as aforetime, and the more that is made in the land the more shall they crave."

"Yea," said he, "that wot I well, that these are of the kin of the daughters of the horse-leech; but how shall they slake their greed, seeing that as thou sayest villeinage shall be gone; belike their men shall pay them quit rents and do them service, as free men may, but all this according to law and not beyond it; so that though the workers shall be richer than they now be, the lords shall be no richer, and so all shall be on the road to being free and equal."

Said I, "Look you, friend, aforetime the lords, for the most part, held the land and all that was on it, and the men that were on it worked for them as their horses worked, and after they were fed and housed all was the lords; but in the time to come the lords shall see their men thriving on the land, and shall say once more, 'These men have more than they need, why have we not the surplus since we are their lords?' Moreover, in those days shall betide much chaffering for wares between man and man and country and country; and the lords shall note that if there were less corn and less men on their lands there would be more sheep, that is to say more wool for chaffer, and that thereof they should have abundantly more than aforetime, since all the land they own and it pays them quit-rent or service, save here and there a croft or a close of a yeoman; and all this might grow wool for them to sell to the Easterlings. Then shall England see a new thing, for whereas hitherto men have lived on the land and by it, the land shall no longer need them, but many sheep and a few shepherds shall make wool grow to be sold for money to the Easterlings, and that money shall the lords pouch; for, look you, they shall set the lawyers a-work and the strong hand moreover, and the land they shall take to themselves and their sheep, and except for these lords of land few shall be the free men that shall hold a rood of land when the word of their lord may not turn them adrift straightway."

"How mean you?" said John Ball, "shall all men be villeins again?"

"Nay," said I, "there shall be no villeins in England."

"Surely then," said he, "it shall be worse, and all men save a few shall be thralls to be bought and sold at the cross."

"Good friend," said I, "it shall not be so; all men shall be free even as ye would have it; yet, as I say, few indeed shall have so much land as they can stand upon save by buying such a grace of their masters."

"And now," said he, "I wot not what thou sayest. I know a thrall, and he is his master's every hour and never his own; and a villein I know, and whiles he is his own and whiles his lords; and I know a free man, and he is his own always; but how shall he be his own if he have nought whereby to make his livelihood? Or shall he be a thief and take from others? Then is he an outlaw. Wonderful is this thou tellest of a free man with nought whereby to live!"

"Yet so shall it be," said I, "and by such free men shall wares be made."

"Nay, that cannot be; thou art talking riddles," said he, "for how shall a wood-wright make a chest without the wood and the tools?"

Said I, "He must needs buy leave to labour of them that own all things except himself and such as himself."

"Yea, but wherewith shall he buy it?" said John Ball. "What hath he except himself?"

"With himself then shall he buy it," quoth I, "with his body and the power of labour that lieth therein; with the price of his labour shall he buy leave to labour."

"Riddles again!" said he, "how can he sell his labour for aught else but his daily bread? He must win by his labour meat and drink and clothing and housing! Can he sell his labour twice over?"

"Not so," said I, "but this shall he do belike; he shall sell himself, that is the labour that is in him, to the master that suffers him to work, and that master shall give to him from out of the wares he maketh enough to keep him alive, and to beget children and nourish them till they be old enough to be sold like himself, and the residue shall the rich man keep to himself."

John Ball laughed aloud, and said: "Well, I perceive we are not yet out of the land of riddles. The man may well do what thou sayest and live, but he may not do it and live a free man."

"Thou sayest sooth," said I.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

(To be continued.)

The man who is not doing work, day by day, that will earn his dinner must be stealing his dinner.—John Ruskin.