

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL.

(Continued from p. 8.)

HE held his peace awhile, and then he said: "But no man selleth himself and his children into thralldom uncompeled; nor is any fool so great a fool as willingly to take the name of freeman and the life of a thrall as payment for the very life of a freeman. Now would I ask thee somewhat else; and I am the readier to do so since I perceive that thou art a wondrous seer; for surely no man could of his own wit have imagined a tale of such follies as thou hast told me. Now well I wot that men having once shaken themselves clear of the burden of villeinage, as thou sayest we shall do (and I bless thee for the word), shall never bow down to this worsen tyranny without sore strife in the world; and surely so sore shall it be, before our valiant sons give way, that maids and little lads shall take the sword and the spear, and in many a field men's blood and not water shall turn the grist mills of England. But when all this is over, and the tyranny is established, because there are but few men in the land after the great war, how shall it be with you then? Will there not be many soldiers and sergeants and few workers? Surely in every parish ye shall have the constables to see that the men work; and they shall be saying every day, 'Such an one, hast thou yet sold thyself for this day or this week or this year? Go to now, and get thy bargain done, or it shall be the worse for thee.' And wheresoever work is going on there shall be constables again, and those that labour shall labour under the whip like the Hebrews in the land of Egypt. And every man that may, will steal as a dog snatches at a bone; and there again shall ye need more soldiers and more constables till the land is eaten up by them; nor shall the lords and the masters even be able to bear the burden of it; nor will their gains be so great, since that which each man may do in a day is not right great when all is said."

"Friend," said I, "from thine own valiancy and high heart thou speakest, when thou sayest that they who fall under this tyranny shall fight to the death against it. Wars indeed there shall be in the world great and grievous, and yet few on this score; rather shall men fight as they have been fighting in France at the bidding of some lord of the manor, or some king, or at last at the bidding of some usurer and forestaller of the market. Valiant men, forsooth, shall arise in the beginning of these evil times, but though they shall die as ye shall, yet shall not their deaths be fruitful as yours shall be; because ye, forsooth, are fighting against villeinage which is waning, but they shall fight against usury which is waxing. And, moreover, I have been telling thee how it shall be when the measure of the time is full; and we, looking at these things from afar, can see them as they are indeed; but they who live at the beginning of those times and amidst them, shall not know what is doing around them; they shall indeed feel the plague and yet know not the remedy; by little and by little they shall fall from their better livelihood, and weak and helpless shall they grow, and have no might to withstand the evil of this tyranny; and then again when the times mend somewhat and they have but a little more ease, then shall it be to them like the kingdom of heaven, and they shall have no will to withstand any tyranny, but shall think themselves happy that they be pinched somewhat less. Also whereas thou sayest that there shall be for ever constables and sergeants going to and fro to drive men to work, and that they will not work save under the lash, thou art wrong and it shall not be so; for there shall ever be more workers than the masters may set to work, so that men shall strive eagerly for leave to work, and when one says I will sell my hours at such and such a price, then another will say, and I for so much less; so that never shall the lords lack slaves willing to work, but often the slaves shall lack lords to buy them."

"Thou tellest marvels indeed," said he; "but how then if all the churls work not, shall there not be famine and lack of wares?"

"Famine enough," said I, "yet not from lack of wares; it shall be clean contrary. What wilt thou say when I tell thee that in the latter days there shall be such traffic and such speedy travel across the seas that most wares shall be good cheap, and bread of all things the cheapest."

Quoth he: "I should say that then there would be better livelihood for men, for in times of plenty it is well; for then men eat that which their own hands have harvested, and need not to spend of their substance in buying of others. Truly, it is well for honest men, but not so well for forestallers and regraters¹; but who heeds what befalls such foul swine, who filch the money from people's purses, and do not one hair's turn of work to help them."

"Yea, friend," I said, "but in those latter days all power shall be in the hands of these foul swine, and they shall be the rulers of all; therefore, hearken, for I tell thee that times of plenty shall in those days be the times of famine, and all shall pray for the prices of wares to rise, so that the forestallers and regraters may thrive, and that some of their well-doing may overflow on to those on whom they live."

"I am weary of thy riddles," he said. "Yet at least I hope that there may be fewer and fewer folk in the land; as may well be, if life is then so foul and wretched."

"Alas, poor man!" I said; "nor mayst thou imagine how foul and wretched it may be for many of the folk: and yet I tell thee that men

shall increase and multiply, till where there is one man in the land now there shall be twenty in those days—yea, in some places ten times twenty."

"I have but little heart to ask thee more questions," said he; "and when thou answerest, thy words are plain, but the things they tell of I may scarce understand. But tell me this: in those days will men deem that so it must be for ever, as great men even now tell us of our ills, or will they think of some remedy?"

I looked about me. There was but a glimmer of light in the church now but what there was, was no longer the strange light of the moon, but the first coming of the kindly day.

"Yea," said John Ball, "'tis the twilight of the dawn. God and St. Christopher send us a good day!"

"John Ball," said I, "I have told thee that thy death will bring about that which thy life has striven for: thinkest thou that the thing which thou strivest for is worth the labour? or dost thou believe in the tale I have told thee in the days to come?"

He said: "I tell thee once again that I trust thee for a seer; because no man could make up such a tale as thou; the things which thou tellest are too wonderful for a minstrel, the tale too grievous. And whereas thou askest as to whether I count my labour lost, I say nay, if so be in those latter times (and worsen than ours they will be) men yet seek a remedy: therefore again I ask thee is it so that they shall?"

"Yea," said I, "and their remedy shall be the same as thine, although the days be different: for if the folk be enthralled, what remedy save that they be set free? and if they have tried many roads towards freedom, and found that they led nowhither, then shall they try yet another. Yet in the days to come they shall be slothful to try it, because their masters shall be so much mightier than thine, that they shall not need to show the high hand, and until the days get to their evillest, men shall be cozened into thinking that it is of their own free will that they must needs buy leave to labour by pawning their labour that is to be. Moreover your lords and masters seem very mighty to you, each one of them, and so they are, but they are few; and the masters of the days to come shall not each one of them seem very mighty to the men of those days, but they shall be very many, and they shall be of one intent in these matters without knowing it; like as one sees the oars of a galley when the rowers are hidden, that rise and fall as it were with one will."

"And yet," he said, "shall it not be the same with those that these men devour; shall not they also have one will?"

"Friend," I said, "they shall have the will to live, as the wretchedest thing living has: therefore shall they sell themselves that they may live, as I told thee; and their hard need shall be their lord's easy livelihood, and because of it he shall sleep without fear, since their need compelleth them not to loiter by the way to lament with friend or brother that they are pinched in their servitude or to devise means for ending it. And yet indeed thou sayest it: they also shall have one will if they but knew it; and for a long while they shall have but a glimmer of knowledge of it: yet doubt it not that in the end they shall come to know it clearly, and then shall they bring about the remedy; and in those days shall it be seen that thou hast not wrought for nothing, because thou hast seen beforehand what the remedy should be, even as those of later days have seen it."

We both sat silent a little while. The twilight was gaining on the night, though slowly. I looked at the poppy which I still held in my hand, and bethought me of Will Green, and said: "Lo, how the light is spreading: now must I get back to Will Green's house as I promised."

"Go, then," said he, "if thou wilt. Yet meseems before long he shall come to us; and then mayst thou sleep among the trees on the green grass till the sun is high, for the host shall not be on foot very early; and sweet it is to sleep in shadow by the sun in the full morning when one has been awake and troubled through the night-tide."

"Yet I will go now," said I; "I bid thee good-night."

Therewith I half rose up; but as I did so the will to depart left me, as though I had never had it, and I sat down again, and heard the voice of John Ball, at first as one speaking from far away, but little by little growing nearer, more familiar to me, and as if once more it were coming from the man himself whom I had got to know.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

(To be continued.)

The animus of the "class" press is plainly shown by the head lines they place over labour news, dispatches, and reports. They exhibit in this way also the real bent of their thinking, for they never fail to treat a labour item in any other way than as a thing apart from that which concerns them. The "class" newspapers have an attitude of their own, and it is always actively or negatively hostile to the interests of Labour.—*The Leader*.

In a fatuously futile editorial, the *Artist*, a "journal of home culture," reviews the past year, and gives gratuitous advice to all and sundry as to the good or evil they have done or may do to "Art" by this or that course of action. The advice is conveyed in platitudinous periods of studied ambiguity, and may mean or not mean all or anything as one's fancy dictates, but any hint of the real condition of art, or its true reason, is carefully avoided. Art is simply the expression of man's delight of life and pleasure in his labour embodied in the work of his hand. So long as the present system of wrong and misery endures there is no hope for a healthy art. Those folk who now repine bitterly over the decadence of Art should work toward the building of the only abode in which it may abide—a Society founded on justice and right, where all have enough and none over-much. For those who are stupidly content there is no word that will reach them; they, like the stolid pharisaic bourgeois, must wait for the rude awakening time holds in store for them.—S.

¹ Forestaller, one who buys up goods when they are cheap, and so raises the price for his own benefit; forestalls the due and real demand and supply; regrater, one who both buys and sells in the same market, or within five miles thereof, buys, say a ton of cheese at 10 a.m. and sells it at 5 p.m. a penny a pound dearer without moving from his chair. For us Socialists the word monopolist will cover both species of thief.—Ed.