January 8, 1887.

The Commonweal. 13

A Dream of John Ball.

(Continued from p. 3.)

"But who can selleth himself and his goods, and ransometh himself from poverty, save he may as willingly 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 more; wilt thou hear me? If thou wilt not, well seest; for surely no man could of his own will have imagined a tale of such follies as thou hast told me. Now well I wot that men having once shaken themselves free of the bonds of the thralldom, and that the child of the village, and the son of the man that may, would steel as a dog matches 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, for women, and little children, and all such men which each may do in a day is not right great when all is said."

"Friend," said I, "from thine own vanity and high heart thou speakest; when they have done this, which many, and some thousands, thousands of such tyrants, they shall fight against it. Wars indeed shall there 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 people, and in the last at the bidding of the 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 fearful as yours; for the forestaller of the market is a villain which is waning, but thou shalt 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 these 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 come to the knowledge of the world, and weak and slow shall be their growth, 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 knowledge, 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 are pinched somewhat less. Also whereas thou sayest that there shall be for ever constables and serjeants going to and fro to drive men from their own land, and ever 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 be forced to do the work, and when they say, in 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 lack lords to buy them.

"Then:st marvel much. Will there be more soldiers and serjeants 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 sold thyself for this task or that this week or this year? Go to now, and get thy bargain done, or it shall be the worse for thee.' And whereasover 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 any man that may, will steel as a dog matches 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, for women, and little children, and all such men which each may do in a day is not right great when all is said."

"Friend," I said, "there shall be the very men of whom they talk who have tried many roads towards freedom, and found that they led nowhere, till they shall try yet another. Yet in the days to come they shall be aloof to try it, because their masters shall be so much mightier than thine, that they will not have any thing to do in the world, but to rise and dominate all men, and being fewest of all men, until at the end of all things they shall come to know that which is their own. But the last men 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 done to death in these matters without knowing it; for as one seeth the oars of a galley when the rowers are hidden, that rise and fall as it were with one will."

"And yet," he said, "that it shall not be the same with those that meet devour; for they have not their own work to do." "Friend," I said, "they shall have the will to live, as the wretchedest thing living has: therefore shall they sell themselves that they may buy and eat. I told thee; and all the vain reasons and the fancies, and the dreams and the hopes of the other day shall be gone; and the last man shall be; and they, to the end of the story, shall think of themselves, that they have a like, as one seeth the oars of a galley when the rowers are hidden, that rise and fall as it were with one will."

"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, and though I had never had it, and I set 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 I were among the men from whom I had got to know.

(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 the very real bent of their thinking, that they never fail to treat a labour item with something akin to the air of a man talking to a dog, a view that may be palpably wrong, but one which gains adherents. And, some of their well-doing may overlap on to those on whom they live.

I am weary of thy riddle," he said. "Yet at least I hope that there shall be better and fewer folk in the land; as may well be, if life is then so foul and workless, some day it must be better and more wholesome.

"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

1 Forester, one who buys goods when they are cheap, and so raises the price for his own benefit; foresters the due and real demand and supply; reg distr, 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 or more cheaper without moving from his chair. For us socialists the word money will cover both species of these.—Ed.