

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL.

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We entered the church through the south porch under a round-arched door carved very richly, and with a sculpture over the doorway and under the arch, which as far as I could see by the moonlight, figured St. Michael and the dragon. As I came into the rich gloom of the nave I noticed for the first time that I had one of those white poppies in my hand; I must have taken it out of the pot by the window as I passed out of Will Green's house.

The nave was not very large, but it looked spacious too; it was somewhat old, but well built and handsome; the roof of curved wooden rafters with great tie-beams going from wall to wall. There was no light in it but that of the moon streaming through the windows, which were by no means large, and were glazed with white fretwork, with here and there a little figure in very deep rich colours. Two larger windows near the east end of each aisle had just been made, so that the church grew lighter toward the east, and I could see all the work on the great screen between the nave and chancel which glittered bright in new paint and gilding; a candle glimmered in the loft above it, before the huge roof that filled up the whole space between the loft and the chancel-arch. There was an altar at the east end of each aisle, the one on the south side against the outside wall, the one on the north against a tracery gaily-painted screen, for that aisle ran on along the chancel. There were a few benches near this second altar, seemingly just made, and well carved and moulded; otherwise the floor of the nave, which was paved with a quaint pavement of glazed tiles like the crocks I had seen outside as to ware, was quite clear, and the shafts of the arches rose out of it white and beautiful under the moon as though out of a sea, dark but with gleams struck over it. The priest let me linger and look round, when he had crossed himself and given me the holy water; and then I saw that the walls were figured all over with stories, a huge St. Christopher with his black beard looking like Will Green, being close to the porch by which we entered, and above the chancel arch the Doom of the Last Day, in which the painter had not spared either kings or bishops, and in which a lawyer with his blue coat was one of the chief figures in the group which the Devil was hauling off to hell.

"Yea," said John Ball, "'tis a goodly church and fair as you may see 'twixt Canterbury and London as for its kind; and yet do I misdoubt me where those who are dead are housed, and where those shall house them after they are dead, who built this house for God to dwell in. God grant they be cleansed at last; forsooth one of them who is now alive is a foul swine and a cruel wolf. Art thou all so sure, scholar, that all such have souls? and if it be so, was it well done of God to make them? I speak to thee thus for I think thou art no delator; and if thou be, why should I heed it, since I think not to come back from this journey."

I looked at him and, as it were, had some ado to answer him; but I said at last, "Friend, I never saw a soul, save in the body; I cannot tell."

He crossed himself and said, "Yet do I intend that ere many days are gone by my soul shall be in bliss among the fellowship of the saints, and merry shall it be, even before my body rises from the dead; for wisely I have wrought in the world, and I wot well of friends that are long ago gone from the world, as St. Martin and St. Francis and St. Thomas of Canterbury, who shall speak well of me to the heavenly fellowship, and I shall in no wise lose my reward."

I looked shyly at him as he spoke: his face looked sweet and calm and happy, and I would have said no word to grieve him; and yet belike my eyes looked wonder on him: he seemed to note it and his face grew puzzled. "How deemest thou of these things?" said he; "why do men die else if it be otherwise than this?"

I smiled: "Why then do they live?" said I.

Even in the white moonlight I saw his face flush, and he cried out in a great voice, "To do great deeds or to repent them that they ever were born."

"Yea," said I, "They live to live because the world liveth." He stretched out his hand to me and grasped mine, but said no more; and went on till we came to the door in the rood screen; then he turned to me with his hand on the ring-latch, and said, "Hast thou seen many dead men?"

"Nay, but few," said I.

"And I a many," said he; "but come now and look on these, our friends first and then our foes, so that ye may not look to see them while we sit and talk of the days that are to be on the earth before the Day of Doom cometh."

So he opened the door, and we went into the chancel; a light burned on the high altar before the host, and looked red and strange in the moonlight that came through the wide tracery windows unstained by the pictures and besflowerings of the glazing: there were new stalls for the priests and vicars where we entered, carved more abundantly and beautifully than any of the woodwork I had yet seen, and everywhere was rich and fair colour and delicate and dainty form. Our dead lay just before the high altar on low biers, their faces all covered with linen cloths, for some of them had been sore smitten and hacked in the fray. We went up to them and John Ball took the cloth from the face of one; he had been shot to the heart with a shaft and his face was calm and smooth. He had been a young man fair and comely, with hair flaxen almost to whiteness; he lay there in his clothes as he had fallen, the hands crossed over his breast and holding a rush cross. His bow lay on one side of him, his quiver of shafts and his sword on the other.

John Ball spake to me while he held the corner of the sheet: "What sayest thou, scholar? feelest thou sorrow of heart when thou lookest on this either for the man himself, or for thyself and the time when thou shalt be as he is?"

I said, "Nay, I feel no sorrow for this; for the man is not here; this is an empty house, and the master is gone from it. Forsooth, this to me is but as a waxen image of a man; nay, not even that, for if it were an image, it would be an image of the man as he was when he was alive. But here is no life nor semblance of life, and I am not moved by it; nay, I am more moved by the man's clothes and war-gear—there is more life in them than in him."

"Thou sayest sooth," said he; "but sorrowest thou not for thine own death when thou lookest on him?"

I said, "And how can I sorrow for that which I cannot so much as think of? Bethink thee that while I am alive I cannot think that I shall die, or believe in death at all, although I know well that I shall die—I can but think of myself as living in some new way."

Again he looked on me as if puzzled; then his face cleared as he said, "Yea, forsooth, and that is what the Church meaneth by death, and even that I look for; and that hereafter I shall see all the deeds that I have done in the body, and what they really were, and what shall come of them; and ever shall I be a member of the Church, and that is the fellowship, then even as now."

I sighed as he spoke; then I said, "Yea, somewhat in this fashion have most of men thought, since no man that is can conceive of not being; and I mind me that in those stories of the old Danes, their common word for a man dying is to say, 'He changed his life.'"

"And so deemest thou?" said he.

I shook my head and said nothing.

"What hast thou to say hereon?" said he, "for there seemeth something betwixt us twain as it were a wall that parteth us."

"This," said I, "that though I die and end, yet mankind liveth, therefore I end not, since I am a man; and even so thou deemest, good friend, or at the least even so thou doest, since now thou art ready to die in grief and torment rather than be unfaithful to the fellowship, yea rather than fail to work thine utmost for it; whereas, as thou thyself saidst at the cross, with a few words spoken and a little huddling-up of the truth, with a few pennies paid and a few masses sung, thou mightest have had a good place on this earth and in that heaven. And as thou doest, so now doth many a poor man unnamed and unknown, and shall do while the world lasteth; and they that do less well than this, fail because of fear, and are ashamed of their cowardice, and make many tales to themselves to deceive themselves, lest they should grow too much ashamed to live. And trust me if this were not so, the world would not live, but would die, smothered by its own stink. Is the wall betwixt us gone, friend?"

He smiled as he looked at me, kindly, but sadly and shamed, and shook his head.

Then in a while he said, "Now ye have seen the images of those who were our friends, come and see the images of those were once our foes." So he led the way through the side screen into the chancel aisle, and there on the pavement lay the bodies of the foemen, their weapons taken from them and they stripped of their armour, but not otherwise of their clothes, and their faces mostly, but not all, covered. At the east end of the aisle was another altar covered with a rich cloth beautifully figured, and on the wall over it was a deal of tabernacle work, in the midmost niche of it an image painted and gilt of a gay knight on horseback cutting his own cloak in two with his sword to give to a half-naked beggar.

"Knowest thou any of these men?" said I.

He said, "Some I should know, could I see their faces: but let them be."

"Were they evil men?" said I.

"Yea," he said, "some two or three. But I will not tell thee of them; let St. Martin, whose house this is, tell their story if he will. As for the rest, they were hapless fools, or else men who must earn their bread somehow, and were driven to this bad way of earning it: God rest their souls! I will be no tale-bearer, not even to God."

So we stood musing a little while, I gazing not on the dead men but on the strange pictures on the wall, which were richer and deeper coloured than those in the nave; till at last John Ball turned to me and laid his hand on my shoulder. I started and said, "Yea, brother; now must I get me back to Will Green's house, as I promised to do so timely."

"Not yet, brother," said he; "I have still much to say to thee, and the night is yet young. Go we and sit in the stalls of the vicars, and let us ask and answer on matters concerning the fashion of this world of menfolk, and of this land wherein we dwell; for once more I deem of thee that thou hast seen things which I have not seen, and could not have seen." With that word he led me back into the chancel, and we sat down side by side in the stalls at the west end of it, facing the high altar and the great east window. By this time the chancel was getting dimmer as the moon wound round the heavens; but yet was there a twilight of the moon, so that I could still see the things about me for all the brightness of the window that faced us; and this moon twilight would last, I knew, until the short summer night should wane, and the twilight of the dawn begin to show us the colours of all things about us.

So we sat, and I gathered my thoughts to hear what he would say, and I myself was trying to think what I should ask of him; for I thought of him as he of me, that he had seen things which I could not have seen.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

(To be continued.)

Original from