December 25, 1886.

THE COMMONWEAL

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL.

John Ball spoke to me while he held the corner of the sheet: "What sayst thou, scholar? I fearest thou-sawest of heart when thou lookest on this easterm for the man, 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 wesen image of a man; say, not even that, for if it were an actual image, it would be as an empty house, and the man 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 word than there is more life in them then they are." I added, "Thou sayest noth, said he; but sorrowest thou not for thine own death when thou lookest on him." I said, "And how can I sorrow when that which I cannot so much as think of?" Bithink thou while that I 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 in some new rich colours. Again he looked on me as if puzzled; then his face cleared as he said, "Yes, forsooth, and that is what the Church meaneth by death, and even that I look for; and that herself I shall see all the deeds..." He sign'd as he spoke; then I said, "Yes, somewhat in this fashion have most of men thought, since no man that can conceive of not being; and I think me that in those stories of the old Devils, their common word for a man dying is to say, 'He changed his life.'"

"And so dearest thou?" I said. He shook his head, and said nothing.

"What hast thou to say herein?" he said, "for there somethings somebetwixt us swan as it were a wall that parteth us."

"This," I said, "that though I die and end, yet unshakibly liveth, there I am not, and it is more the part of the voice than the man, and even so will the walls be figured as now, and even so will the word of the Doom of the Last Days, in which the painter's themes are parted 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 himself to call."

"Yes," said John Ball, "vis a good city and far as you may see twixt Canterbury and London as for its kind, and yet do I doubt, therefore, that they are dead soon, and that I may see them in very new scenes. As I am a scholar, that all such have souls! and if he be, so was well done of God to make them! I speak to thee thus for I think that art no dulter. And if thou he, 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 least, "Friend, I never saw a wiser in the body; I cannot tell."

He crossed himself and said, "Yet do I think that one many days are gone by my soul shall be in bliss among the fellowship of the saints, and marry shall be in, to be, even before my body rises from the dead; for wisdome is in the world, and I will not fear any pain that the long agony gone from the world, as St. Martin and St. Francis and St. Thomas of Canterbury, who shall speak well of me to the heavenly felicity."

"I know not," I said. 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 looking on him, he seemed to note it and his face grew paled. "How deemest thou of these things?" I said he; "why do men die else if it be otherwise than this?"

"I know not," I said, "what they do there live!"

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!"

"Yes," 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 road screen; then he turned to use with his hand on the ring-budget, and said, "Eft so thin many dead men!"

"Nay, but few," I said.

"And I am a many," he said; "but come now and look on these our friends first and then our corner, so that ye may not look to see them whereas I am 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 chamber: a light turned on high, before the lord, and looked red and strange in the moonlight that came through the wide, and the pictures and background of the glazing: there were new stalls for the priests and the monks, where we entered, carved much and human and beautiful that was my. And every man that was rich and fair colour and delicate and finery. Our dead lay before the high altar on holy, their heads all covered with linen cloths, for more than three and a half years they had been and backed in the fray.

We went up to them and John Ball took the cloth from the face; he had been shod to the heart with a shoe and his face was calm, and very young. His hair flaxen to whiteness; he lay there in his clothes as he had fallen, the hands crossed over his head and holding a cross high. He lay on one side of him, his quiver of shafts and his sword on the other.