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on History

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THE LORD MAYOR'S SHOW

1884

It would be a hard-hearted person indeed who could either object seriously to or look sourly upon the Lord Mayor's Show as a holiday pageant, an afternoon brightening-up of the hideous and sordid streets of the "Great Wen," as Cobbett called it; and considering the depths of the degradation of all spectacular art at the present day, it would be too cruel to criticise the spectacle of last Monday from an artistic point of view, even if the columns of JUSTICE were the best place in which to do so. But since the Fathers of the City have thought good in one part of their show to call attention to an episode of London history, the murder of Wat Tyler, it may be worth while for the sake of the practical moral to recall to our readers the story of which that murder was the climax; all the more as it has become a sort of nursery tale in which the figures of the wise and pious kingly youth, the sturdy loyal citizen, and the ruffianly agitator have been made to stand out against a dark background of foolish and ignorant armed peasants, knowing not what they asked for.

We will take our tale from that marvellous gallery of pictures of the past, which a contemporary, the aristocratic priest, John Froissart, wrought for us. Priest and Queen's Chaplain though he was, his Gothic love of incident prevents his prejudice from damaging his account of facts too much. Besides it seemed to him so natural that such things should be, that he never thinks of

softening any enormity of the lordly tyranny which he served: *hypocritical* tyranny was the invention of a later age.

Says he:— ... "I will speak thereof as it was done, as I was informed, and of the incidents thereof. There was an usage in England and yet it is in diverse countries, that the noble men hath great franchises over the Commons, and keepeth them in servage: that is their tenants ought by custom to labour the lords' lands, to gather and bring home their cornes, and some to thresh and to fanne, and by servage to make their hay, and hew their wood and bring it home: ... and there be more of these people in England than in any other realm.... These unhappy people began to stir saying, why should they be kept so under like beasts; the which they said they would no longer suffer, for they would be all one."

In short they objected to exploitation by means of serfdom. The worthy cannon then tells us of the "imagination of a foolish priest in the county of Kent, called John Ball," who on Sundays after mass used—in fact to hold open air meetings. Into his mouth Froissart puts simple and noble words by no means out of date at present, beginning thus; "Ah ye good people, the matter goeth not well to pass in England, nor shall do till every thing be common, and there be no villains nor gentlemen, but that we all be united together." John Ball was imprisoned by the Archbishop, but soon came out again by no means cured of his "imagination." The men of the home counties rose, saying that they would march on London, where they hoped to be well received, "and would so do to the King that there should not be one bondman left in England." They were 60,000 strong led by John Ball, Jack Straw and Wat Tyler, "who," says Froissart, "was indeed a tiler of houses, an ungracious person." The King's mother the Princess passing through their bands as she came from Canterbury received no sort of harm from them: the townsmen of Rochester were, says Froissart, "of the same secte" and received them well; they forced the captain of the Castle and

some other men-at-arms to go with them as their leaders, and sent from Blackheath where they were encamped, Sir John Newton the Captain of Rochester to lay their grievances before the King; the result of which was that the King held a parley with the leaders from his barge off Rotherhithe, but nothing came of it; so they marched into London where they met with no resistance from the citizens; 30,000 of whom, says Froissart "were of their own sect." There they broke open the Marshalsea Prison and pillaged the Savoy, the palace of the Duke of Lancaster, the King's uncle, who was as unpopular as need be: otherwise they did little damage, considering how rough the times were.

The Mayor, Sir William Walworth was ready to attack them, but the King and his court were panic-stricken and found the good old plan of temporising and lying the most convenient. The Earl of Salisbury and the wise men about the King said; "Sir, if ye can appease them with fairness it were best, and to grant them everything that they desire."

So a proclamation was issued that they should all draw together to a fair plain place called Mile-End, whereas the people of the city did sport them in the summer season. There the King and his lords met them and asked what were their grievances, "And such as understood him said, 'We wish that ye make us free for ever, and that we may be no more bond, nor so reputed.' 'Sirs,' said the King, 'I am well agreed thereto; withdraw you home to your own houses, and leave behind you of every village two or three; and I shall cause writings to be made and seal them with my seal, the which they shall have with them, containing everything that ye demand; and to the intent that ye may be the better assured I shall cause my banners to be delivered into every bailwick, shire and county.'"

These promises broke the neck of the rebellion; the country people took their papers and banners and went home happy we must suppose with those very immaterial guarantees. But their leaders knew their masters better and dared to try to hold matters

together still; and the next day (Saturday) the rebels met together on Smithfield some 20,000 strong, thither also came the King and his lords from Westminster, intending, as Froissart says, to leave London, but halting at St. Bartholomew's Church on sight of the rebels. Wat Tyler, seeing the hall, spurred up to the King; Froissart with mediæval minuteness gives a strange dramatic dialogue between the two; which was ended by the coming up of the Mayor with a small following secretly armed. It was then pretty much a word and a blow, Walworth unhorsed Wat with a sword stroke to the head, and one Standish or Cavendish, a squire of the King's, finished him with his sword as he lay on the ground. The angry people, seeing their leader fall, advanced with bent bows, but the King met them again boldly enough, promised all redress, and offered himself their captain; and the rebels uncertain and leaderless again began to disperse. Meanwhile the 'party of order' had been drawing to a head, and a large body of well-armed men, seven or eight thousand, came on the field. The King, says the chronicler, prevented a general onslaught of the knights and men-at-arms on the now broken people, but their leaders and spokesmen were forced to deliver up the banners and letters of redress they had received, which latter were torn up before their eyes, and the whole host was dispersed.

John Ball and Jack Straw were hunted out and slain, and their heads with Wat Tyler's stuck on London Bridge.

Then came the reaction of which Froissart tells with great naiveté. The king made a progress through Kent, at every town and village the ring-leaders were hunted out and dealt with; the letters promising redress were torn up solemnly before the people, and the great peril for the privileged was got over. Froissart leaves no doubt in our minds as to how that peril struck him; for he connects this rising of the Kentishmen with the Revolt of Ghent, and the rising of the 'unhappy people with the iron mallets at Paris.' But all these things were but as the stirring

among the dry bones, terrible as they seemed (*sic*) to the rich of that period, and it took a long course of economic events before the power of privilege was even shaken.

Meantime we need make no mistake about the cause for which Wat Tyler and his worthier associate John Ball fell; they were fighting against the fleecing of the people by that particular form of fleecing then in fashion, viz.: serfdom or villeinage, which was already beginning to wane before the advance of the industrial guilds. We need not grumble therefore if the sword of St. Paul in the city arms is sometimes innocently taken for Wat Tyler's instrument of martyrdom, however little the worthy city fathers may like the construction we should put on that legend. Nor will we say that he and John Ball died for nothing, however doleful is the story (an oft repeated one) of the stout men of Kent breaking up half in fear and irresolution, half deluded by the lies and empty promises of their masters, to whom, as ever, any course seemed good that enabled them to keep the people down.

WHY WE CELEBRATE THE COMMUNE OF PARIS

1887

The "moons and the days" have brought us round again to the anniversary of the greatest tragedy of modern times, the Commune of Paris of 1871, and with it the recurring duty for all Socialists of celebrating it both enthusiastically and intelligently. By this time the blatant slanders with which the temporarily unsuccessful cause was assailed when the event was yet fresh in men's minds have sunk into the dull gulf of lies, hypocritical concealments, and false deductions, which is called bourgeois history, or have become a dim but deeply rooted superstition in the minds of those who have information enough to have heard of the Commune, and ignorance enough to accept the bourgeois legend of it as history.

Once more it is our duty to raise the whole story out of this poisonous gloom and bring it to the light of day, so that on the one hand those who are not yet touched by Socialism may learn that there was a principle which animated those who defended revolutionary Paris against the mingled dregs of the woeful period of the Second Empire, and that that principle is still alive to-day in the hearts of many thousands of workers throughout civilisation, and year by year and day by day is growing in strength and in the hold it has of the disinherited masses of our false society; and on the other hand that we Socialists may