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The Good Old Times

Freedom Press (London)

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Amidst the sordidness and squalor of the carnival of Capitalism, we often find it hard to realize that things have not always been as they are. Not that there is no beauty to fill our hearts and bring the tears to our eyes, in country-side and mountain glen to-day! Not that the exquisite loveliness of human nature is less intoxicating in its eternal freshness than in the older days of romance! Not that our treasure of knowledge is losing its preciousness as it grows, or that time-keen joy of thought palls amid the stress that stimulates it! None of this; and yet so bitter is the ever-quicken- ing consciousness of loss and wrong in the social atmosphere, that the purest pleasures of the few who are free to enjoy are darkened and turned to pain by the want of fellowship—the ceaseless sense of the fellow men living mutilated, partial lives, shut out by the cruelty of their brethren from the glory of manhood.

It is in moments when this needless burden of suffering wears most heavily upon our hearts, when it seems most inevitable and hopeless, and its hideous irony eats away the very springs of effort, that the vivid imagination of the poet touches the dreariness of the present with hope by making real to us the reality of change.

Standing in dreamland beside William Morris,¹ we live in the life of the England of the fourteenth century. We feel as with one pulse the aspirations of the peasantry of Kent when they flocked round time standard of rebellion, and marched to London to demand the kings countenance in making good their rights as free men against the attempt of the landlords and lawyers to force them back into villeinage. We see the Kentish village bathed in the evening sunshine, every work of men's hands in it, from the grace of the church spire or bold decoration of the dwelling-rooms, to the neat fencing of the gardens, I beautiful with the loving skill of time artist who freely creates for his own satisfaction. We take part in the manly vigor of the fight of the villagers against the armed band of would-be oppressors, including that "bastard of an inky sheepskin," the lawyer. We stand at the foot of the village cross with the crowd of sturdy bow and bill men, and harken to the voice of John Ball, the outcast priest, as he tells of fellowship:

"Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell; fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from earth shall wane."

1 "A Dream of John Ball," by WM. Morris, author of "Time Earthly Paradies." With an illustration by En. Burne-Jones. Reeves and Turner, London, price 4s. Cd. A complete series of copies of the Commonweal containing this work can be obtained from the office of that paper, 13, Farringdon Real, E.C. price 1s.

"Forsooth, he that waketh in hell and feeleth his heart fail him, shall have memory of the merry days of earth, and how that when his heart failed him there, he cried on his fellow, were it his wife or his son, or his brother or his gossip, or his brother sworn in arms, and how that his fellow heard him and came, and they mourned together under the sun, till again they laughed together and were but half sorry between them. This shall he think on in hell, and cry on

his fellow to help him, and shall find that therein is no help because there is no fellowship, but every man for himself. Therefore, I tell you that the proud, dispiteous rich man, though he knoweth it not, is in hell already, because he bath no fellow; and he that bath so hardy a heart that in sorrow he thinketh of fellowship, his sorrow is soon but a story of sorrow—a little change in the life that knows not ill."

In bringing thus vividly before us what has been called the golden age of English labor, when feudal tyranny was dying and capitalistic tyranny was but coming to the birth, William Morris has not only recalled one of the earlier phases of the long fight for freedom, but has cheered our hearts by enabling us to realize what men can be when for a little while they have thrown from them the yoke of despotism and are able to live according to the fullness of their own nature.