

"The Mad Priest of Kent"

IMAGINE a Sunday morning somewhere in England, in the summer of 1381. The peasants were coming out of church when there passed along the village street "a man clad in a long dark-brown gown of coarse woollen, girt with a cord, to which hung 'a pair of beads' (a rosary), and a book in a bag. He was tall and big-boned, a ring of dark hair surrounded his priest's tonsure; his nose was big but clear cut and with wide nostrils; his shaven face showed a longish upper lip and a big but blunt chin; his mouth was big and the lips closed firmly; a face not very noteworthy," says William Morris, "but for his grey eyes well opened and wide apart." John Ball, for it was none other than "the mad priest of Kent," as Froissart calls him, made straight for the Village Cross, and mounting the top step, was soon facing a dense crowd of villagers. Aloft was held a banner on a cross-pole, with a picture of a man and woman half clad in skins of beasts, the man holding a spade and the woman a distaff and spindle. Underneath were the written words:—

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

Prefacing his address with some homely counsel on the subject of fellowship and goodwill, the speaker would then go on to deliver his message in words recorded: "Good people, things will never be well in England so long as there be villeins and gentlemen. By what right are they who we call lords greater than we? On what grounds have they deserved it? Why do they hold us in serfage? They have leisure and fine houses; we have pain and labour, and the wind and rain in the fields. And yet it is of us and our toil that these men hold their estate. Men of Kent, ye dwell fairly here, and your houses are framed of stout oak beams, and your own lands ye till; unless some accursed lawyer with his false lying sheep-skin (parchment deed) and forged custom of the Devil's Manor hath stolen it from you."

It was to a people smarting under heavy taxation, imposed to pay for the war with France, that Ball came with his message. The Black Death in 1349 and the two following years had decimated the population and created a shortage of labourers; naturally and inevitably, wages rose, despite the Statute of Labourers by which the landowners in Parliament, "with true mediæval blindness to the irresistible character of economic forces," sought to keep wages down to rates prevailing in 1347. Driven by these same economic forces to pay higher wages, the landowners, aided by the rapid increase in the number of labourers, as nature sought to repair the ravages of the Plague, endeavoured to re-enforce the old customary manorial labour services which had lapsed or been commuted during the period of shortage. Small wonder that there was considerable "labour unrest" and the common people heard him gladly.

For twenty years Ball had been openly proclaiming his revolutionary message throughout the country. Once having got the great gospel of freedom into his head, he could not be prevailed on to be quiet. Frequently imprisoned by order of the Church, we are told that "on coming out he went about saying the very same things." "Mad," as the landowners called him," writes J. R. Green, "it was in the preaching of John Ball that England first listened to the knell of Feudalism and the declaration of the rights of man." The teaching of Wycliffe and his poor "priests" was another factor in arousing the people to action. These "Bible men" had been introduced to the new world of the Old Testament. "They read of the brave times when there was no king in Israel, when every man did that which was right in his own eyes, and sat under his own vine and fig-tree, none daring to make him afraid," and so they went about among the people telling how, in the beginning, all men were equal; and that therefore it was not God's will for some men to be rich and powerful while others were poor and wretched.

The imposition in 1381 of the third and heaviest poll-tax of three groats (about £1 in our money) on all persons over 15 years of age was the spark that fired the powder. Students of history will be familiar with the story of the terrible events of that year. The peasants in the twenty-six counties within the triangle formed by a line across England from Scarborough to the Severn, thence along the coast, round by Land's End to Dover and up to Scarborough again, rose in support of their demand as expressed in the petition presented to the young King Richard II. at Mile End—"We will that you free us for ever, us and our lands and that we be never named or held as villeins." Of course the rising was suppressed. The landowners, aided by the Church militant in the person of Spencer, Bishop of Norwich, rallied to the side of "law and order"; Ball and other leaders were executed. The survivors returned to the old state of villeinage—yet not quite the same state, for they had taught their masters to fear them.

Nigh six centuries have passed, and to the villein of John Ball's time has succeeded the wage-slave of today. To him the Commonwealth League brings the same message: "Things will never be well in England so long as there be villeins and gentlemen—Land Lords and landless."

—J. W. GRAHAM PEACE in *Commonweal*, London, Eng.

OUR Press Secretary, Mr. P. R. Meggy, has a lengthy and interesting contribution in the March-April number of *LAND AND FREEDOM* published in New York. In it he deals with the Single Tax and Protection. For some years now Mr. Meggy has contributed informing articles to this very fine magazine.—*Standard*, Sydney, Australia.

"THERE'S no more tribute to be paid. If Cæsar can hide the sun from us with a blanket, or put the moon in his pocket, we will pay him tribute for light; else, sir, no more tribute."—Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Act III, Scene I.