

# Britain's Fight for Democracy

## III.—The Task of British Reformers

By J. A. Stevenson

The ideal of British reformers was to secure for their country a primacy in the act of living, a superiority in moral principles and an abundance of possibilities of happiness for the inhabitants of the Empire. They desired not so much to extend the British flag over a wider area of the earth's surface, as to create a Britain which every other nation would envy and desire to imitate. There were long legacies of error and neglect to be liquidated and paid off. The advent of the industrial revolution which transformed Britain from a rural nation to a complex industrial community coincided with the Napoleonic wars and the period of exhaustion and slow recuperation which followed. Vast political reforms were achieved after 1820, but the new industrial system crept into existence without any adequate provision against its manifest evils and dangers. The coming of Free Trade in 1847 brought a certain relief, but it also strengthened the dominance of the "laissez faire" doctrine and the idea that the community had any duties towards its less fortunate members, received scant acceptance. In the main the teaching of the Manchester school founded by Cobden and Bright, tended both in internal and external affairs to take a restricted view of the functions of government. Government existed to maintain order, to restrain men from violence and fraud, to protect the community against foreign and domestic enemies, to permit men to enjoy the fruits of their labors, and enter unimpeded into arrangements and contracts with one another for their mutual benefit. Free contract was the watchword for industrial life as an inevitable corollary to the personal, colonial and international freedom, which was aimed.

### Trades Unions

But free contract did not prevent the shameless exploitation of the labor of women and children under disgraceful conditions in factories, and the workmen soon found that even their position was precarious, and to redress the balance resorted to combination in Trades Unions. Their organizations supported by J. S. Mill, but disapproved of by the leaders of the Manchester school, was a most far-reaching and important step. They were essential to the maintenance of the standards of life by the industrial classes, because they alone in the dearth of legislative protection could redress the inequality between employer and employee. Trades unionism took away some freedom from the workman, but in other ways it conferred greater liberty, for there could be no liberty for the worker with the employing classes in a position to dictate terms. Without the trades unions Great Britain would soon have been peopled only by two classes, millionaire capitalists and a pauperized proletariat, like China—a nation of Mandarins and serfs. Beneficent as were the results of the movement, the working classes failed to secure proper attention to their interests, and after the collapse of the Chartist agitation hope of amelioration faded dim. Disraeli was aware of the urgency of "The Condition of England," problem more fully than Gladstone and the Liberals who were immersed in constitutional changes and attempts to further the cause of European liberty, but his personal ambition tied him to the reactionary Tories, and what ground was gained in industrial reform accrued from the efforts of noble philanthropists like Lord Shaftesbury and trade union leaders like Edgar Jones and Applegarth. There was no attempt at town planning or housing schemes, the new industrial centres grew up disordered congeries of unlovely jerry-built dwellings, sanitation was unorganized and spasmodic industrial life was held cheaply without the protection of Compensation Acts, medical assistance

for the poor was expensive and inefficient, the idea of insurance had gained little ground, old age pensions were a Utopian dream and the concept that the community had any claim upon surplus land values or vast inheritances was scorned as rank heresy.

### Attitude Towards the Colonies

Parliament was a first class club, where two factions of honorable gentlemen almost exclusively drawn from one class, alternately governed the realm. The Colonies were regarded as outlying tenant farms, used to send scapegraces and surplus population to, but distant and uninteresting, "a millstone round our necks," Disraeli called them. About 1880, the advanced wing of the Liberal party, under the inspiration of Chamberlain and Dilke, was moving to braver deeds, and their unauthorized program caused great consternation among both Whigs and Tories.

Then came the Home Rule Bill and the great Liberal secession, doomed to cripple the forces of progress for twenty years, during which, with one

boyant slush and commercial greed. The climax was reached in the South African War, which, if it gave a severe blow to the Little England School's lack of faith in the maintenance of the fabric of the British Commonwealth, also provided a sad disillusionment to those Imperialists who believed in the quantity of a state rather than its quality. It proved the comparative ineffectiveness of brute military force against the determined national spirit of a few thousand farmers and revealed the utter unsoundness of the Tory conception of Empire. One result was the upgrowth of a new liberal Imperialism which was able to make the generous and successful experiment of granting speedy self-government to the conquered Boers. Another consequence was that the war's revelation of the hopeless muddle and inefficiency prevailing in many departments of the national life engendered a general determination to end the calculated and fatal neglect of social problems now pressing on every side, which had been the prevalent habit of the ruling powers for forty years.

By 1906 there had accumulated a variety of social grievances, the inevitable result of chronic evils long neglected. The great Liberal victory of that year aroused high hopes, the incompetent reactionaries were swept away, new men with new ideals took the reins of office and new measures of reform were promised in profusion.

### Socialist Movement

Mr. Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign had its Reform campaign had failed, but in company with the rapidly growing Socialist movement it had brought forward as the dominant issues, such questions as standards of living, regularity of employment, wages, and access to the land, and in general turned a searchlight upon the condition of the industrial workers at the expense of questions like Home Rule and religious education. The political power of the old middle class, supreme since 1832, had passed to the workers, who, in 1906, realized their strength for the first time; they were discontented and tired of protests, they wanted not merely to vote but to have some share in directing their own destinies. Much as the capitalist classes dis-

liked it, the economic issue cropped up at every turn, both in Parliament and out of it. Debates on poor laws, old age pensions, child feeding, small holdings and conditions of employment became as common as they had hitherto been rare. The Conservatives clung plaintively to their panaceas of Protection and land purchase, but the Liberals were able to translate some of their beliefs into legislation. The aged were provided with pensions, poor children were given the right to some food and medical care, the Insurance Act was devised to help the sick and disabled and mitigate some of the evils of unemployment, and the establishment of Wages Boards in certain trades abolished the worst forms of sweating. Efforts were made to avert strikes by Conciliation Boards and a Poor Law Commission made an extensive inquiry into social conditions. Land reforms met with fierce opposition, but Ireland was successfully endowed with thousands of rural cottages and the Scotch Land Act strengthened the tenants' position and set up machinery for fixing fair rents. In England, the Small Holdings was a failure thru the studied negligence of interested County Councils, but David Lloyd George outlined a far-reaching scheme of land reform, which moved his opponents to drastic counter proposals. On the eve of the war, the British land system was obviously in the melting pot. Only in dealing with liquor and education had the Liberals totally failed to make progress, and the attack was to be renewed as soon as the desperate Home



French soldiers wearing the new steel helmet holding an armored trench during a violent German artillery bombardment. The second identification of trench fighting along the Western front has led to many striking innovations, chief of which are the steel helmet and the armored trench. As regards the former, the efforts now in reducing casualties has quite amply justified the introduction. The armored trench is, however, a more complex and difficult problem; the use of heavy artillery pieces against field fortification has rendered some sort of additional protection imperative. There is a distinct tendency to depart from the old type of trench consisting merely of heaped-up earth and sandbags—and to develop in the direction of steel-plated structures, heavy earthen overhead works, and metal shields of various types for strengthening the defense. The Germans have brought into the field small steel supports of a revolving type, such as the one shown in the scene above. This particular example had been captured by the French and was being used by them against the enemy. When shrapnel and high-explosive shells burst almost directly above a line of trenches, apertures and bulwarks formerly caused many head-wounds. This is now effectively counteracted by the steel helmet, which saves the trench fighter from a great number of small wounds to the head which might prove very serious, if not fatal. In the picture given above, a French armored trench is seen under a heavy enemy fire. All the men are wearing the new steel helmets and are seeking shelter from the severe overhead bombardment.

Drawn by F. Matasia from Photographic Material, Nov., 1915

French soldiers wearing the new steel helmet holding an armored trench during a violent German artillery bombardment

small break, the Tories ruled the destinies of Britain. While the trading and shopkeeping middle classes were doing their part in creating the means of economic power and prosperity their theories and policies were the object of constant attack and criticism by the Church and the landowners, who constituted the main buttresses of Toryism. As a result of the French Revolution the majority in these two elements had become obscurantist and reactionary, and their leaders, with a few exceptions, were incapable of meeting the Liberals in the intellectual field as long as Gladstone and Bright lived. They denounced the Liberal manufacturers as exploiters of the workers and their free trade cosmopolitanism as anti-national, but they offered no definite reform policy of their own, and resisted such progressive steps as the Education Act of 1870.

### The Rise of Imperialism

They had fallen back on the traditional policy of external expansion, now called Imperialism, which had been in disfavor since 1815. There was undoubtedly some need to establish a definite scheme of organization for the Empire adapted to its changing political needs, and both Chamberlain and Disraeli had definite, if unsound, ideas on the subject. But the Imperialist movement, welcomed as it was by classes who desired to divert popular attention from internal reform to external affairs, a trick dear to all reactionaries, fell into wrong hands and lost its inspiration in a maze of flam-

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