

# Britain's Greatest Victory

1838-1847

By J. A. Stevenson

ARTICLE I.

## The Free Trade Movement Launched

The year 1815 saw the battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon was destroyed and England was set free to reorganize her own national life in face of the vast changes wrought by what is known as the industrial revolution, i.e., the development of a purely agricultural to a manufacturing community. The initial reforms were mainly constitutional—the Catholics were emancipated in 1829, the Reform Bill was passed in 1832, and the political complexion of the electorate underwent a vast change. Even then the franchise was confined to the middle classes, but the monopoly of power had passed out of the hands of the two oligarchic cliques of Whigs and Tories, who had controlled the English Parliament for generations. Up to this time, Britain, like every European country, had followed a protectionist policy and levied tariffs on practically every imported product. The Napoleonic wars had intensified the spirit of nationalism and brought about a hatred of everything foreign which is in true accord with the protectionist gospel. The first great critic of the protectionist system was Adam Smith, the famous Scotch economist, who having compiled a vast fund of information about trade through his intercourse with the merchants of Glasgow and having imbibed through personal acquaintance the doctrines of great French economists such as Quesnay, published the results of his enquiries in "The Wealth of Nations." Its publication may be said to be the birth of the free trade movement in Great Britain. Lord Shelburne agreed with his conclusions and the younger Pitt proclaimed himself a keen disciple. He proceeded to put some of these principles into practice, but the life and death struggle with Napoleon interrupted his good intentions, and the question of free trade remained in abeyance. There were soon to come other attacks

on the protective system. Mr. Huskisson, who was Canning's lieutenant till he was killed in an accident, was the first convinced free trade minister who began a definite policy of remitting duties.

### Landed Interest in Control

By the time of the Reform Bill the question had become acute. A series of large manufacturing cities had grown up and the whole face of counties like Lancashire and Yorkshire had been changed. The population had almost doubled since the beginning of the century and there had been very little increase in the corn supply. The landed interest still controlled Parliament and contrived to maintain a heavy duty on all imported corn, which kept their rents at an extortionate level. The system obviously could not last and the great assault on it was not long delayed.

### Cobden Makes Beginning

The beginning of the Anti-Corn Law League came in October, 1838, when a party of seven men, including Richard Cobden, a Manchester manufacturer, whose name will ever be associated with the free trade cause, met in a hotel in Manchester and formed an Anti-Corn Law association. In June, 1839, the association showed that its intentions of forcing an agitation were serious, by raising a subscription from sympathizers to finance its operations. Cobden struck the right note in saying: "Let us invest part of our property in order to save the rest from confiscation," with the result that within a month six thousand pounds had been raised. A great banquet was given to the members of Parliament who supported free trade and other associations were formed. Cobden introduced a scheme for united action among the various associations which came into being throughout the country and from this federation was

evolved the Anti-Corn Law League. The object was declared to be "to obtain by all legal and constitutional means the total and immediate repeal of the tariff laws on food." Cobden used to relate how he was visited in February, 1839, by a nobleman who was in favor of modification of the tariff but was unable to assent to total repeal. In answer to his inquiries they explained their policy, and he answered: "You will overturn the Monarchy as soon as you will accomplish that."

### Parliament Overwhelmingly Protectionist

A Whig or Liberal government was in power, but four-fifths of the members of the House belonged to the landed interests who were deeply interested in the maintenance of the Corn Laws, and the various motions in favor of free trade introduced by Mr. C. P. Villiers, who survived up to 1900 as an active member of the House of Commons, were rejected by huge majorities. The repealers felt that political action in Parliament was for the present hopeless, and that their efforts must be concentrated on converting the country. They accordingly started a paper of their own called the "Anti-Corn Law Circular," which educated its readers in free trade economics and declared consistently that all existing political factions were equally dishonest and profligate; that the repealers would not suffer their great question to be a shuttlecock of parties and that they would pursue a consistent course of strenuous protest.

### Stagnation Throughout Britain

The Whigs had ruled the country save for a few months from 1830 to 1841, and during Lord Melbourne's ministry in 1839, the question of the Corn Laws was still an open one. As time went on the financial position of the country became very serious, and there was an

annual deficit in the Budget. There was every sign of a commercial and industrial stagnation which could be remedied only by wide economic changes. There was a lack of a capable minister of finance, but in 1840 the Whig government agreed to proceed with a radical simplification of the tariff. They determined to attack the giant monopolies of corn, sugar, and timber, all of which were well entrenched at Westminster. But the ministry was doomed to an immediate fall through inherent weaknesses and the proposal for the new duties was rejected, with the result that Sir Robert Peel was able to force the Whigs to a dissolution.

### Whig Government Defeated

The election of 1841 was the first in which the Anti-Corn Law League took part. The Whigs were not prepared for total and immediate repeal of the duties, but would consent to a moderate duty. The Tories had no definite policy, save resistance to the changes proposed by the Whigs. The Free Traders determined to hold to their principles, even at the expense of being called extremists. Whenever there was a constituency ripe for the candidates of their creed they selected one and in most others they supported Whig candidates who would promise support for reduction of duties. In the elections in the North of England the Free Traders were successful against both the old parties, Cobden himself being elected member for Stockport. The final result gave Sir Robert Peel a majority of 90, and Lord Melbourne having resigned he undertook office with a great administration containing such able men as Lord Lyndhurst, Lord Stanley and Sir James Graham. But this great and talented combination, though possessing a majority in both Houses, was shattered to pieces in five years by the work of Cobden and his followers.

## Heroines Three

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little astonished at this for Molly always telephoned—usually several times a day.

The moment I held the envelope in my grasp I knew that it was no common communication. I felt instinctively that I must be prepared for something extraordinary.

Of course, I had not the least idea of what I should read. How could I have? By no possible flight of fancy could I have anticipated the strange—the curious—the remarkable nature of the contents—which marked for me the commencement of a momentous experience.

I tore the envelope open quickly and ran over the words in Molly's writing which met my amazed eyes.

At first I could hardly believe that I saw aright:—

"Darling:

"I said that I should tell you first and that you should know before anyone. I am just writing this hurriedly to inform you that I have eloped. I haven't time to stop and give you the whys and wherefores, but the reasons are good and sufficient. I knew that with your practical sense—although you dream of romance,—and with your strict conscience that, therefore, the secret might be a burden to you and came to the conclusion that I had better say nothing. Dearest, I can only wish that you were as happy as I am and as I am going to be,

"Devotedly,

"MOLLIE."

Of course, I was speechless, though I wonder that I did not scream. Was this what Molly considered a joke? Was this what she believed to be good business? The foolish, headstrong girl. Of course,

if she had told me I should have done everything I could to keep her from making such a mistake—and now—

I did not at first notice the postscript scribbled at the foot of the second page.

"Of course, this can't be a secret any longer. My only regret is that I could not have you for a bridesmaid. I know, though, that you would never have consented—so I'll just have to be married without you, as I never thought I could be, in the dearest little country church of which we know at Rosedale. We have gone in the automobile, which is not so romantic and proper for an elopement as a post-chaise, but is more speedy. I shall have to sail for Europe without seeing you—but what fun we shall have talking it over when I get back!"

The madcap girl. My breath was fairly taken away. For a moment I stood dazed. Then with a flash all the energy and directness and common-sense I had in me came back with a rush. With a glance I reviewed the situation. I felt that, as I was placed, Jim was the best person to help me. Instantly I was at the telephone.

The moments seemed endless as I stood there with the receiver in my hand, like any heroine, a prey to varying emotion. As might appear from the facts, Molly should be considered the heroine—but wait.

At last I heard Jim's voice.

"Oh," I cried all in a breath, "I must see you immediately. It's most important and urgent and vital—"

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"You must come at once."

"I will," he answered.

"Meet me at the Wilkins," I said, for

I had half made up my mind in a vague fashion, "as soon as you can—and sooner."

III

In an instant I was away. Catching up a hat as I ran through the hall, I was across the lawn and down the avenue and at the Wilkins house, a block distant.

"I must see Mr. Wilkins immediately," I announced to the startled butler.

"Mr. Wilkins is out—"

"I must see Miss Vernon," I declared.

Indeed, I had dashed past him before he could say anything.

I found her in the conservatory, and grabbing her hand I almost shook her.

"Molly has gone," I ejaculated.

"Molly—gone—where?"

"Eloped—run away—with Bur Ogden and she must be stopped—"

"Oh," cried Aunt Matilda.

"Where is Mr. Wilkins?" I demanded.

"Oh, my dear," moaned Miss Vernon as she recovered her lost glasses and still struggled after her scattered wits. "He's not at home. I—what can I do?"

"I don't know," I hurried on in despair. "Something must be done. If there's no one else, I must do it."

Just then I heard Jim's welcome voice in the hall.

"Jim," I exclaimed, bolting out.

I drew him into the reception-room and confronted him. I am sure that my agitated countenance must have suggested something of the startling nature of the crisis.

"The automobile was at the office. I jumped in and came at full speed. What's up?"

"Everything," I whispered thrillingly. "Molly has run away—eloped."

He whistled, staring at me.

"With Bur Ogden," I added.

"I didn't think she was such an idiot," he said vigorously. "I understand now. When I asked Ogden yesterday if he was to play polo on the team with us in the match against the Illinapolis people, he said he was going away today. This must have been what he had in mind."

"Of course," I declared impatiently. "There is not a moment to be lost. She's gone in the automobile to Rosedale to be married in the church. Where is Rosedale?"

"Rosedale," he said, "must be a place one can hardly call a village, about forty miles from here, on the lake."

"Jim," I said stepping forward in my excitement and grasping his arm, "she must be saved. I'm sure if I see her I can make her listen to reason—or wait or something."

"Your automobile," I ran on, "is at the door, you say. It's a sixty-horse power Paillard—the fastest in the place. We must go after them—" I cried intrepidly, "and catch them."

"They've got a start," he said thoughtfully, "but the Wilkins machine is only an old Nonpareil. Perhaps something might be done."

"Something can be done," I argued, still holding him by the elbow. "Something shall be done."

Before he had made any objection, or in fact, had a chance to say anything, I led him—dragged him—to the front door and down the steps to the big car. I had often admired it before. How glad I was to see its mighty frame. The huge engines indicated such power. The low raking lines as of a piratical battleship promised such speed.

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