

## THE OPENING OF THE CENTURY.



HE echoing tones that sound forth the death knell of the old year as it slowly passes into the dim forever, suggest almost instinctively to the thoughtful mind a retrospective glance at the conditions which prevailed when those same bells heralded the birth of that year. And so as the few remaining days of 1900 toll out another century we glance back at the commencement of that century. At first thought it would seem that what we learn of the people and their governments were simply stories culled from mythological books and not, as we afterwards are forced to believe, actual occurrences in national history. It is hard to realize at the present time that laws so heinous in their tenets and so opposed to those which govern our own country at the present time could possibly have existed and been upheld by a rational people.

In Europe war seemed to engross the mind and heart of the populace, to the total exclusion of justice and right. From the utmost North to the shores of the Mediterranean, from the confines of Asia to the Atlantic, the energies of all nations, the proceeds of every industry, were poured forth in the effort to destroy. The utmost distress and fear prevailed throughout the land, and the middle and lower classes were allowed to suffer poverty of the worst kind in order to satisfy the thirst for blood. One hundred and seventy millions were numbered among the European people, four millions of whom were set apart, by their own choice or decree of their governments, for the sole purpose of fighting. It can readily be seen at what an enormous cost these men were maintained, and the drain on the public purse was an exhaustive one. For about twenty-five years this condition of affairs went on during which time millions of lives were sacrificed. It is said that so long a time did these bloody wars last that before the close men were fighting in the quarrel who had been unborn when it broke out. During this time Great Britain won for herself a foremost place among the European nations, because she proved that she was wise, just and energetic beyond the others, but the price of her glory was a heavy one. There was no time to devote to the social condition of the people and they gradually sunk to a very low plane. The war created a demand for certain manufactured articles which gave employment to a great many and the scale of wages was a comparatively high one, but there was not enough work for all by any means. The unskilled labourer earned eleven shillings in Scotland and thirteen to fifteen shillings in England. Carpenters, masons and bricklayers received seventeen to eighteen shillings in Scotland and twenty-two to twenty-five shillings in England. The hand-loom weaver earned seventeen shillings in Scotland, and at Bolton, where the work demanded greater skill, from twenty-two to twenty-five shillings could be easily earned by a competent workman.

After the close of the wars, however, there was a radical change in the wage scale in several industries, and it would appear that the energy devoted to the furtherance of all schemes in the interests of war was then directed toward the suppression of the poor and the devising of plans to render life almost unendurable. In addition to the bitter waves of poverty which swept over every part of Great Britain, the laws governing the amount of wheat, bread, etc., consumed by the working people, were such that only limited quantities could be purchased by them even though they had the money to pay for what they required. Wheat, which in 1792 was as low as forty-seven shillings per quarter, rose in 1801 to one hundred and eighty shillings. During some weeks of that year the quarter loaf sold at one shilling and tenpence and then was only obtainable in limited quantities. The reason assigned for this was that there was no foreign grain to relieve the consumption of the home product and what assistance could have been rendered by the Government was withheld, as the income of the various members of this organ would have been greatly depleted had they put forward any effort to lessen the burden on the poor. For thirty long years the people were forced to submit to hardships of this kind. Famine was of frequent occurrence, and this, together with the terrible plagues which visited the land, carried away in some parts of England more people annually than were born. It need hardly be mentioned that with a Government composed of men so utterly void of feeling for others, the manner of levying taxes was anything but a just one and was not one of the least causes of dissatisfaction and misery. While the war lasted enormous sums had to be expended upon equipment, etc., to defray which the people were taxed outrageously.

Perhaps no stronger proof of the utter heartlessness of the times, however, could be given than in the criminal laws which were in force. One law recognized two hundred and twenty-three capital offences. Such a thing as injuring Westminster bridge was considered worthy of hanging; appearing disguised on a public road, the cutting down of young trees, and so on, offences which at the present day would hardly be deemed worthy of the mildest censure, men were then put to death for. And yet death was almost preferable with a great many people to confinement in those awful dungeons which served as prisons, and to be subjected to the indignities of an unpaid gaoler whose only remuneration was obtained through fees extracted at his pleasure, by brutal violence, from those unfortunate enough to have fallen into his power. He it was who supplied their food, for which they were forced to pay an extortionate price, and from him they obtained the straw which served them for beds, unless they were content to sleep on the damp floor. The payment of certain fees was an indispensable preliminary to regaining liberty even after an acquittal had been pronounced, and many who had been declared innocent of crime were detained for years because of their inability to satisfy the exaction of their gaoler. To obtain money to meet these demands the prisoners were allowed to engage in the making of such articles as they knew how and with chained ankles to stand outside the prison gates and endeavor to sell them to passers by. In addition to