READINGS FROM NEW BOOKS.

THE BRITISH MISTAKE IN SOUTH AFRICA.*

When the franchise negotiations came to an *impasse*, the British Government announced (September 22) that their demands and scheme for a "final settlement of the issues created by the policy of the Republic"—a phrase which pointed to something more than the redress of grievances—would be presented to the Republic. These demands, however, were never presented at all. After an interval of seventeen days from the announcement just mentioned, the Transvaal declared war (October 9 and 11). The terms of their ultimatum were offensive and peremptory, such as no Government could have been expected to listen to. Apart, however, from the language of the ultimatum, a declaration of war must have been looked for. From the middle of July the British Government had been strengthening their garrison in South Africa, and the despatch of one body of troops after another had been proclaimed, with much emphasis, in the English newspapers. Early in October it was announced that the Reserves would be called out and a powerful force despatched. The Transvaal had, meantime, been also preparing for war, so that the sending of British troops might well, after the beginning of September, be justified as a necessary precaution, since the forces then in South Africa were inferior in number to those the Boers could muster. But when the latter knew that an overwhelming force would soon confront them, and draw round a net of steel whence they could not escape, they resolved to seize the only advantage they possessed, the advantage of time, and to smite before their enemy was ready. It was, therefore, only in a technical or formal sense that they can be said to have begun the war; for a weak State, which sees its enemy approach with a power that will soon be irresistible, has only two alternatives,—to submit or to attack at once. In such a quarrel the responsibility does not necessarily rest with those who strike first. It rests with those whose action has made bloodshed inevitable.

A singular result of the course things took was that war broke out before any legitimate *casus belli* had arisen. Some one has observed that, whereas many wars have been waged to gain subjects, none was ever waged before to get rid of subjects by making it easier for them to pass under another allegiance. The franchise, however, did not constitute a legitimate cause of war, for the British Government always admitted they had no right to demand it. The real cause of war was the menacing language of Britain, coupled with her preparations for war. These led the Boers also to arm, and, as happened with the arming and counter-arming of Prussia and Austria in 1866, when each expected an attack from the other, war inevitably followed. To brandish the sword, before a cause for war has been

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shown, not only impairs the prospect of a peaceful settlement, but may give the world ground for believing that the war is intended.

By making the concession of the franchise the aim of their efforts, and supporting it by demonstrations, which drove their antagonist to arms, the British Government placed themselves before the world in the position of having caused a war without ever formulating a *casus belli*, and thereby exposed their country to unfavorable comment from other nations. The British negotiators were, it may be said, placed in a dilemma by the distance which separated their army from South Africa, and which obliged them to move troops earlier than they need otherwise have done, even at the risk (which, however, they do not seem to have fully grasped) of precipitating war. But this difficulty might have been avoided in one of two ways. They might have pressed their suggestion for an extension of the franchise in an amicable way, without threats and without moving troops, and have thereby kept matters from coming to a crisis. Or, on the other hand, if they thought that the doggedness of the Transvaal would yield to nothing but threats, they might have formulated demands, not for the franchise, but for redress of grievances, demands, the refusal of which, or the evasion of which, would constitute a proper cause of war, and have, simultaneously with the presentation of these demands, sent to South Africa a force sufficient at least for the defence of their own territory. The course actually taken missed the advantages of either of these courses. It brought on war before the Colonies were in a due state of defence, and it failed to justify war by showing any cause for it, such as the usage of civilized States recognizes.

As Cavour said that any one can govern with a state of siege, so strong Powers, dealing with weak ones, are prone to think that any kind of diplomacy will do. The British Government, confident in their strength, seem to have overlooked not only the need for taking up a sound legal position, but the importance of retaining the good will of the Colonial Dutch, and of preventing the Orange Free State from taking sides with the Transvaal. This was sure to happen if Britain was, or seemed to be, the aggressor. Now the British Government, by the attitude of menace they adopted while discussing the franchise question, which furnished no cause for war, by the importance they seemed to attach to the utterances of the body calling itself the Uitlander Council in Johannesburg (a body which was in the strongest opposition to the Transvaal authorities), as well as by other methods scarcely consistent with diplomatic usage, led both the Transvaal and the Free State to believe that they meant to press matters to extremities, and that much more than the franchise or the removal of certain grievances was involved; in fact, that the independence of the Republic was at stake.

They cannot have intended this, and indeed they expressly disclaimed designs on the independence of the Transvaal. Nevertheless, the Free State, when it saw negotiations stopped after September 22, and an overwhelming British force ordered to South Africa, while the proposals foreshadowed in the despatch of September 22 remained undisclosed, became convinced that Britain meant to crush the Transvaal. Being bound by treaty to support the Transvaal, if the latter was unjustly attacked, and holding the conduct of Britain, in refusing arbitration and resorting to force without a *casus belli*, to constitute an unjust attack, the Free State Volksraad and burghers, who had done their utmost to avert war, unhesitatingly threw in their lot with the sister Republic. The act was desperate, but it was chivalric. The Free State,

hitherto happy, prosperous, and peaceful, had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Few of her statesmen can have doubted that Britain must prevail and that their Republic would share the ruin which awaited the Transvaal Dutch. Nevertheless, honor and the sense of kinship prevailed. It is to be hoped that the excited language, in which the passionate feelings of the Free State have found expression, will not prevent Englishmen from recognizing, in the conduct of this little community, a heroic quality which they would admire if they met it in the annals of ancient Greece.