

HOW GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS ARE GIVEN.

(To the Editor of the Times.)

SIR,—In a recent debate in the House of Commons serious charges were made against Government for the bad qualities of their supplies, for the irregularity with which their contracts were fulfilled, and for the frauds which were sometimes committed ; and hence was founded an argument for Government becoming their own manufacturers. These charges are, in great measure, true. It is right, however, the public should know with whom the blame rests ; and whether the fact is really that the honesty of British traders and the ability to produce articles of first-rate quality have departed from this commercial country ; or, rather, whether the fault lies with those who now wish to cover their own blunders by making these sweeping charges against the manufacturers of England. If the fact were correctly stated by Mr. Monsell, England would indeed have reason to blush for the honour of her commercial population ; but I think the following remarks will prove that the fault is to be traced to a cause carefully kept out of the public sight.

The system of contracts adopted by the Government in general, and by the War Department in particular, is vicious in the extreme, costly beyond all comparison, and demoralising to the trading community.

Lord Palmerston justly observed, in the debate in question, that every article of warlike stores ought to be of the very best quality that could be produced, and that any other was useless. Nothing can be more true than this. But how does the War Department endeavour to procure these unexceptionable articles? Their contracts are given to the lowest tenderer, whoever he may be. No matter how long and how well a manufacturer has served them; no matter how high the quality of his goods stands in the estimation of the trade at large; no matter how great the expense he has incurred to produce a material suited to the class of goods required by the Government,—if any other person can be found willing to undertake a contract for one per cent less than their long-tried and approved manufacturer, the cheaper man has the contract given to him, no matter what his character may be, or whether he has any character at all. The consequence is, that manufacturers run one against another in a race for cheapness. Whatever, therefore, is good enough just to pass the examination, and no more, is all they can give, is all they are bound to give, and is all they can really afford to give. For if one man by his excellent manufacture gives an article twenty per

cent better than another, he gets no possible advantage ; his cheaper neighbour obtains the order because he is perhaps 10s. cheaper in 100%, though he supplies articles worth twenty per cent less in actual value.

This is no imaginary case, except that the real difference in quality is often much greater, and the apparent saving in price is often much less than is here stated. Do we want instances of this ? The whole of the complaints made during the present war are only one series of illustrations. Why are the edge-tools so bad that the soldiers cannot use them ? Why are the clothes so bad they cannot wear them ? Why are the shoes so bad that they scarcely hold together ? Why the mortars and guns so bad that they cannot fire them ? Why the compressed hay so bad as to be nearly useless ? Why the preserved provisions so bad that they are compelled to bury thousands of pounds worth of them (as happened some two or three years ago) to prevent contagion from the filthy offal which was packed in place of wholesome food ? The same answer applies to all. *The character of the contractor is not taken account of ;* it is his price alone that decides whether or not he shall have the contract. And as long as this system lasts, so long will inferior articles be delivered for Government orders, to the irreparable loss of the public service, the excessive waste of the public money, and the great disgrace of British commerce. While this system lasts, very many of the highest class of

manufacturers abstain altogether from offering supplies to Government. This is well known; and there are many of the very first houses in the kingdom which absolutely refuse to supply the Government at all, because they are aware of these facts by dear-bought experience.

The latest case which has been mentioned of defective supplies, is that brought forward by Mr. Monsell in the House of Commons on Friday night. He stated, that large quantities of defective mortars purchased by Government were found utterly unfit for use, and could not be employed with any safety. But Mr. Monsell omitted to state how these supplies were obtained. The public may possibly like to know; and the facts are patent, and can easily be verified.

In the most utter ignorance of the difficulties of casting mortars of sufficient strength to withstand the enormous strain they are required to bear, the War Department commissioned some of their officials to go through the iron districts of England and Scotland and try where they could find persons willing to contract for the supply. Numbers of persons absolutely unacquainted with the quality of iron necessary for the purpose, and equally ignorant of the method of manufacture, were induced to undertake the supply of these mortars. No restrictions whatever as to the quality of the iron to be used were imposed. Each contractor used whatever kind of iron he thought proper; and as many of them from ignorance of

the subject offered to supply these mortars at ruinously low prices, and some of them scarcely above the price of the raw material, it might at once have struck the authorities that they could expect nothing but failure from purchasing such mortars. We have heard much of the Scientific Committee at Woolwich. If this is a proof of their science, what shall we expect from them when they become general manufacturers of every thing, from the paper of a cartridge to the far more important articles of heavy iron guns and mortars? The result of this experiment has been most lamentable. Many hundreds of these defective mortars have been obtained, which are just strong enough to bear the Woolwich proof, but which are found to be utterly unfit for actual service, and, as Mr. Monsell has himself stated, cannot be used for arming the fleet in consequence of the now ascertained danger of their bursting. A more lamentable example of incompetence has not been exhibited during the present war. The loss to the public in a pecuniary point of view has been enormous. But, instead of throwing the blame on the contractors, the fault ought to rest on the War Department, which adopted so absurd a method of procuring a supply of one of the most important and difficult of the munitions of war, and which the slightest possible share of practical knowledge could at once have decided would lead to nothing but failure and utter disappointment. As long as such ignorance prevails among the Go-

vernment authorities, and as long as the present system of purchasing supplies by the lowest tender, irrespective of the character and known ability of the contractor to supply suitable articles, lasts, so long must Lord Palmerston's theory, that the best possible quality of warlike stores is indispensable for the country, remain a dead letter; and the stigma of constant failure must rest on the Government authorities by encouraging a system of contract calculated only to engender fraud and to destroy, as far as lies in their power, the emulation among manufacturers to excel in the quality of their productions, rather than to produce inferior articles at the lowest possible price.

I am, Sir, your humble servant,

T. F. D.

Birmingham, March 12.

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