

MR. CHAMBERLAIN

ON

MAJUBA.

(From the authorised edition of his speeches).

I ask your attention. . . . to the settlement which we have recently made of the unfortunate war in the Transvaal. This settlement has been the object of violent attack in the House of Peers. You have been told that it constitutes a dismemberment of the Empire, that it is a national surrender; you have been told for the hundredth time that it has destroyed the prestige of England, and it has caused Earl Cairns to blush, who never blushed before. Well, sir, these are terrible calamities, especially the last; but before we consider how far these accusations can be sustained, let me ask you to think seriously what is the alternative which it is said we ought to have adopted. We are accused of dismembering the Empire, and to avoid this, we ought, in the opinion of our opponents, to have maintained the annexation of the Transvaal. That annexation was made by the Conservative Government upon two distinct assurances. They declared, in the first place, upon information which was supplied to them, that the majority of the white inhabitants in the Transvaal desired the transfer, and they declared that unless it was effected we should infallibly be involved in a native war, which would endanger our South African possessions. Well, you all know that after that transfer was effected we found ourselves, in spite of it, immediately involved in two native wars—one with Cetewayo and the Zulu people, and the other with Secocoeni; and you know, and they know now if they did not know before, that the great majority of the Boer inhabitants of the Transvaal are bitterly hostile to the English rule, and yet we are told that we ought to have persevered in wrong-doing, after it was proved that the two grounds upon which the annexation was defended were fallacious, and rested on no solid foundation—that we should still force our rule on an unwilling people, whose independence we had solemnly engaged by treaty to respect. And this we were to do in order to spare Lord Cairns the unwonted blush with which he graced his peroration and alarmed his brother peers. I will not at this moment stop to question the morality of such a step as that, but I want you to think for a moment of the expediency of it, of the wisdom of those statesmen who recommend such a course to Her Majesty's Government. It has been proved to us that the Boers are at all events brave soldiers, that they are skilled in the use of arms, that they are, physically at least a match even for English soldiers. The Transvaal is a country as large as France—a wild and difficult country—and it is perfectly evident to everyone that if we are to hold it down by force we must permanently maintain a number of troops at least equal to the number of our possible opponents. Well, we know also that the Orange Free State, which is a neighboring territory, would make common cause with their co-religionists and men of the same nationality in the Transvaal; and therefore I say that it is perfectly certain that not less than from 15,000 to 20,000 English troops must be permanently stationed there, if we are to hold that country by force and against the will of the inhabitants. And to what end are we to do this? To prevent the dismemberment of the Empire. Why, the annexation was only reluctantly accepted by Lord Carnarvon three years ago. The territory has only been in our hands for a short three years, and it came into our possession upon information which we now know to be incorrect. And if we let them go, this population of 40,000—

a population less than that contained in any one of the sixteen wards of this town in which I am speaking—why this dismembered Empire of ours will still contain 250,000,000 of subjects to the Queen, to rule whom well and wisely is a duty and a responsibility which I think is sufficient even for the wildest ambition.

THE BOERS.

Well, but we are told that there is another course which has recommended itself to some of our critics, and that is, that we should have used the overwhelming forces which we placed at the disposal of Sir Evelyn Wood in order to attack the Boers, and that then, after we had defeated them in a bloody encounter—military honour being satisfied—we might have retired from the Transvaal, which we should have rendered desolate by the slaughter of many of its brave defenders. Before such a recommendation as that should commend itself to your minds, and to mine, let us consider for a moment what sort of people these are whom we are asked to treat in this revengeful way. The Boers are not naturally a warlike race. They are a homely, industrious, but somewhat rude and uncivilised nation of farmers, living on the produce of the soil. They are animated by a deep and even stern religious sentiment, and they inherit from their ancestors—the men who won the independence of Holland from the oppressive rule of Philip II. of Spain—they inherit from them their unconquerable love of freedom and of liberty. Are not these qualities which commend themselves to men of the English race? Are they not virtues which we are proud to believe form the best characteristics of the English people? Is it against such a nation that we are to be called upon to exercise the dread arbitrament of arms? These men settled in the Transvaal in order to escape foreign rule. They had had many quarrels with the British. They left their homes in Natal as the English Puritans left England and went to the United States, and they founded a little Republic of their own in the heart of Africa. In 1852 we made a treaty with them; they agreed to give up slavery, which had hitherto prevailed in their midst, and we agreed to respect and to guarantee their independence; and I say under these circumstances is it possible we could maintain a forcible annexation of the country without incurring the accusation of having been guilty, I will not say of national folly, but I say of national crime? That was the way in which the matter was understood by the late Government, who were not particularly scrupulous about these matters, but they distinctly instructed Sir Theophilus Shepstone, who was their representative in South Africa, not to take over the Transvaal unless he was satisfied that the majority of the people wished for the change. He did satisfy himself, as we know now, upon insufficient and inaccurate information. The annexation was submitted to Parliament, and I am glad to think that on that occasion I was one of the small minority who voted against the proceeding. At the same time, I will frankly admit, there were very strong arguments indeed to justify the majority in the course which they took—arguments based upon the assurances which were given to us by the Government. That was in 1877. Shortly afterwards the Zulu war broke out, and the Boers remained quiet. I daresay they were not unnaturally very well satisfied to see the English doing their work for them, fighting and destroying their former enemies. At all events, they contented themselves with protests, and memorials, and deputations to this country. The late Government rejected their petitions and refused to reconsider the question of annexation, and so matters stood when we came into office. About that time we were all agreed—there was no difference of opinion—that the original annexation was a mistake, that it ought never to have been made, and then there arose the question, could it then be undone? It is very easy to do evil; it is not so easy to escape the consequences of it, or to put things back again in the same position in which they would have been if they had never been disturbed. We were in possession of information to the effect

that the great majority of the people of the Transvaal were reconciled to annexation. We were told that if we reversed the decision of the late Government there was a great probability of civil war and anarchy, and, acting upon these representations, we decided that we could not recommend the Queen to relinquish her sovereignty, but we assured the Boers that we would take the earliest opportunity of granting to them the freest and the most complete local institutions which might be found compatible with the welfare of South Africa.

MISLED.

You know it is not difficult to be wise after the event. It is not difficult to see now that we did wrong in so deciding. I frankly admit that we made a mistake. I say that whatever the risk was—and I believe it was a great one—of civil war or anarchy in the Transvaal, if we had reversed the decision, it was not so great a danger as that which we actually incurred by maintaining the wrong-doing of our predecessors. But let me show you what was the kind of information upon which we acted. We received despatches to the same effect which were continued almost to the actual outbreak of hostilities. We received a despatch, dated November 19th, 1880, from Sir Owen Lanyon, who was administering the Transvaal, in which he said, "three-fourths of the population are secretly in favour of annexation. The action of a few agitators must not be taken to be the opinion of the country, and there is not much, if any, cause for anxiety in the state of affairs." In a despatch dated December 5th, he repeated similar sentiments. On December 16th, barely ten days later, the Boers broke out into open insurrection. They established a provisional Government, and they hoisted the old flag of the Republic at Heidelberg. Well, there was then, at all events, no longer the possibility of a doubt as to the state of affairs. It was perfectly evident, under those altered conditions, that we should have to make new arrangements; but at the same time it was necessary that we should be in a position to take guarantees, in the first place for the safety of loyal settlers, if there were any such in the Transvaal; in the second place, for the good treatment of the native population who had accepted our rule; and, in the third place, against the recurrence of quarrels with native tribes across the borders, which might lead to difficulties in South Africa. And, therefore, we hurried forward reinforcements with such speed that, when later on the conditions of peace were arranged by Sir Evelyn Wood, he had under his command something like 12,000 troops—more than the total adult male population of the whole of the Boers in the Transvaal. Now just let me say, in passing, a word about Sir Evelyn Wood. He is known to you, he is known to every Englishman, as one of the bravest soldiers, as one of the most skilful commanders in the British service. But I say that in my humble judgment he has earned a higher title to admiration and to the respect of his fellow countrymen by his loyalty in carrying out satisfactory terms of settlement, by resisting the temptation which might well be strong to a soldier of using his overwhelming force in order to revenge a military disaster, than he would have done if he had won the greatest victory, or had entered the Transvaal in triumph over the bodies of its slain.

"PREFERRING JUSTICE TO REVENGE."

While then, the Government were preparing for every event, we did not think that we were justified—and it is for you to say how far you agree with us—we did not think we were justified in closing the door to a peaceful settlement. The overtures for this settlement came in the first instance from President Brand, a man who is deserving of the hearty recognition of every friend of peace. He is the President of the Orange Free State. He has done his best to prevent his fellow-countrymen from going into the war, and to put a stop to the unnecessary effusion of blood. And in the second place, overtures came from the Boer leaders. Mr. Kruger, their Vice-President,

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wrote to Sir George Colley to say that he was confident of the justice of his cause; and he was so certain that the English people, if they only knew the true facts, would do him right, that he was willing to submit the case to a Royal Commission, to be appointed by the Queen. Well, sir, we thought that those were terms which ought to be accepted, and instructed Sir George Colley, if certain conditions could be obtained, to arrange for a settlement upon that basis. Among the conditions, the first and most important was that the Boers should desist from armed opposition. But while the correspondence was going on, in the midst of the negotiations, unfortunately on three several occasions, the British troops marching in inferior numbers to attack the strong position of the Boers, met with a repulse. Those events were deplored by us, as they must be by everyone, but they did not seem to us to constitute a reason why we should withdraw the offer which we had previously made. In those attacks we were the aggressors—not the Boers—and our losses, greatly as we grieve for them, did not make the original cause of the war more just; they did not make the prolongation of this miserable and inglorious struggle more desirable and expedient. And therefore when Sir Evelyn Wood, acting on his own responsibility, arranged for an armistice we approved his proceedings. And when the terms of peace were arranged, when the Boers accepted our offer, as we had originally made it, we rejoiced in the prospect of a settlement without further effusion of blood, whether of Englishmen or Dutchmen, and we did not think the English people would feel themselves to be humiliated because their Government had refused knowingly to persist in a course of oppression and wrong-doing, and we had accepted without a victory, terms which were the best we could reasonably expect that even the greatest victory would give to us. We are a great and powerful nation. What is the use of being great and powerful if we are afraid to admit an error when we are conscious of it? Shame is not in the confession of a mistake. Shame lies only in persistency in wilful wrong-doing. And if Earl Cairns likes to sit in sackcloth and ashes—if he likes, in well-feigned abasement, to expiate the folly of the Administration of which he was a member in the hasty annexation which has led to all these trials—in Heaven's name let him have that gratification. But when he dares to say that the English nation is shamed by the course we have taken, I deny him the right to be judge in such a cause, and I appeal to the impartial public opinion of Europe and of America, which has approved of the action of the Government in preferring justice to revenge, and the best interests of South Africa to the vain pursuit of military glory.—(From MR. CHAMBERLAIN'S speech at Birmingham, 7th June, 1881.)

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