

Dr. W. J. LEYDS  
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THE NEW WAR IN  
SOUTH AFRICA,

*AND HOW IT IS BEING CARRIED ON.*

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Letter from  
AN OFFICER IN THE FIELD.

London:

"STOP THE WAR" COMMITTEE, CLOCK HOUSE,  
ARUNDEL STREET, W.C.

—  
*Price One Penny.*

THE NEW YEAR IN  
SOUTH AFRICA

BY THE EDITOR OF THE SPECTATOR

LONDON: HENRY COLWELL, 1881

PRINTED BY HENRY COLWELL, 1881

THE SPECTATOR, 1881

## The New War in South Africa.

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THE War which was begun in October, 1899, for the purpose of punishing President Kruger and asserting the paramountcy of Britain over the Transvaal, came to a close when President Kruger fled across the frontier and General Roberts proclaimed the annexation of the Republic in Pretoria.

Since then a new War has been begun—a War waged avowedly for the purpose of compelling the burghers to become unwilling subjects of the Queen. It is a War which of necessity tends to produce much greater hardships than the War that preceded it. We then fought against a regular Government. We are now waging War against a nation for the purpose of extinguishing its nationality, and we refuse all terms save those of unconditional surrender. Some results of this determination on our part are described in the letter of "An Officer in the Field," which has been received from the seat of War.

The statements which he makes are not incredible, are, alas! not in themselves improbable. Of course, if evidence is demanded which would convict in a criminal court, from the nature of the case, you cannot have it. You could hardly have it in a single one of the accepted devilries of history. But put the circumstances before your mind's eye. Think of the probabilities of all this brutality occurring under the conditions of the present war, in regions remote from the eye of the

non-military public, and ask yourself whether any other results than those described by "An Officer in the Field" could be expected to follow.

But if these horrors and crimes are the inevitable result of the new War upon which we have entered, is it not worth careful consideration whether we are justified in the attempt to reduce a nation to subjection by the devastation of its homes? We have destroyed the Government of the Transvaal; we have vindicated the paramountcy of Great Britain; is it necessary, furthermore, to make a wilderness of the country and to prosecute a War of extermination to the bitter end?

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ONE of the greatest calamities of War, especially a prolonged War, is the moral degeneracy that sets in among the combatants; and I fear this is sometimes even more marked among the victors than among the vanquished, for, flushed with triumph, they believe they have a right to trample to any extent on a prostrate enemy. Years of civilisation and peace teach men to respect the lives and property of others, but a few months of War seem to scrape off this veneer of virtue and return them to their primitive savagery.

### **The Reversion to Savagery.**

This certainly is the case with the English troops, for I can hardly believe that a year ago they would have sanctioned the line of conduct which is now being pursued in the conquered territories. General conventions, customs of civilised War, respect for women, tenderness to children, which were the common phrases in England, are treated as foolish cant, binding, of course, on their enemies always, but on themselves only when they do not impede their purposes. I do not speak of the rank and file of the soldiery,

because little can be expected from them, but of those whose education and experience ought to have taught them better things.

### **No Restraint from Public Opinion.**

I think, perhaps, one of the causes which has led to this recklessness is the isolation of the theatre of War, and the entire absence of any public opinion. The country is delivered over to the Army; no news is allowed to leak through the strict censorship, and foreigners are absolutely excluded. I confess that I have been continually astonished at the methods of dealing with the enemy advocated by officers. I was inclined for a time to put them down to irresponsible and foolish chatter, which the talkers themselves would not put into practice if they had the power, but as time wore on, one after another of these methods was adopted by the authorities, and either silently applied or publicly proclaimed. And curiously enough, all this time there has been a general complaint that we are dealing too leniently with the Boers, and that the War is being prolonged by a perverse and misapplied generosity. In England, I believe, there is an idea that we are acting up to the highest standard of chivalry, and that our mercy requires to be tempered with justice to make it more applicable to the naturally vicious nature of the Boer.

### **The Conspiracy of Silence.**

I think it is in the interest of humanity generally that we should look facts in the face, and not allow ourselves to be deceived by the narratives of special correspondents who know full well how short would be their shrift in South-Africa if they dared to paint, or even to sketch with the lightest touch, the darker scenes of the War. Few of them, indeed, know all that occurs, and if they did a false shame and a spurious patriotism would probably induce them to hide it. No man wishes to face the furious invective that has been poured on Mr. Burdett-Coutts; money and labour and influence in high places will be used for all they are worth to prove him a liar; and libel and persecution are all the rewards he can ever hope to receive.

But before proceeding further it will be advisable to state definitely some of the facts on which I base my statements; and in so doing I exclude isolated acts and crimes committed by irresponsible individuals, because these are inseparable from War, and are due to the passions and vices of humanity at a time when they are most excited and under least control.

### **Respect for Private Property.**

One of the principal points which distinguish civilised from barbarous War is respect for the property and the persons of the non-combatant population. So much has this become a recognised custom, that when doubts were expressed as to the safety of Johannesburg and the mines, special representations were made to Mr. Kruger by the English Government, and he was informed that, any destruction of property being contrary to the rules of War, he would be held personally responsible for it. Again General Buller, addressing a memorandum to General Joubert, shortly after he took command in person, informed him that no damage would be done to Boer farmhouses, and appealed to him to respect English property in like manner. This was when a great portion of Natal and Cape Colony was in the hands of the Dutch, and an enormous amount of damage could have been done if they so desired.

### **The Burning of Houses.**

As a matter of fact it turned out that Johannesburg and the mines, the property of their most virulent enemies, of the men who, according to Boer belief, had been the instigators of the War, remained safe in their hands; but no sooner were matters reversed, and the British troops began to enter the territories of the Free State and the Transvaal, than every house from which the inhabitants were absent were ruthlessly destroyed. Doors and window frames were first burnt; then the floors were pulled up, and the supporting beams taken down, so that the roofs fell in. A house costing seven or eight hundred pounds was often destroyed in an hour to cook the breakfasts for a battalion, so that the route of

every detachment was marked by bare walls and ruined homesteads.

### **A British Victim of the Practice.**

At Maribogo Pan, the first spot on Transvaal soil touched by one of our armies of invasion, stands a small group of houses, consisting of farm buildings and a store. The owner is an Englishman who, when the War broke out, risked everything for his country; he left his houses at the mercy of the Boers, and joined the defenders of Mafeking. During all these months his property was untouched, and when he returned he found it as he had left it. But a few days after he got home the advanced guard of the English army passed that way and wrecked everything in a day. He complained very bitterly that he had been spared by his enemies and ruined by his friends. This is no isolated case. I merely mention it as an example, and that I may not be accused of dealing with generalities only.

### **The Gutting of Churches.**

But excess soon begets greater excess. From farmhouses to churches is certainly a long step; but these, too, after a time, furnished fuel for the flames. Here, too, lest I be accused of exaggeration, I give an example. North-east of Pretoria, near the Elands River and just where the road crosses a stream, stood a small Dutch chapel; in the month of July a column halted within a few hundred yards of it and bivouacked for the night. In a few hours doors, windows and pews were broken up and carried away to cook the dinners, without protest from any one; and if the army had not moved on next morning before daylight, the roof would have boiled the water for breakfast.

### **Loot.**

When buildings were treated in this way, it is unnecessary to say that fowls, pigs, sheep, horses, cattle and carriages were eagerly



swept up by the invading army; not requisitioned and taken by proper authority as required for the use of the army, but seized by any private soldier or trooper who happened to see them. The mounted men spent more time in searching the houses for fowls and eggs than in watching for the enemy; every general and every officers' mess had their own special scouts, and loot, not the enemy, was the prime object of their search. I have even seen artillerymen leave their guns in the middle of an action to chase a couple of pigs that had incautiously wandered that way from a neighbouring mission station; whether they preferred the sound of the guns to the singing of psalms I do not know, but they soon learnt that the soldier is a dangerous acquaintance. I confess I could not resist being amused at the chase; the ground was rough and covered with boulders; down fell one man and then another; one just reached the little pig as he struggled to escape; another kept on after the mother, but caught his foot in a rock at the last moment, and she escaped—cured, I expect, of her desire for War.

### **Why We Cannot Catch De Wet.**

In England people are astonished at the mobility which enables De Wet to defy the efforts of all our generals; but they would cease to wonder, if, for instance, they could see the march of a column of the Imperial Light Horse, with its endless array of waggons and vehicles of all sorts, piled up with the contents of Boer houses: beds, chairs, tables, all things that can be moved are carried away; and not by this corps alone, but Canadians, New Zealanders, Yeomanry, all pursue the same game. Such proceedings are a sad commentary on the Peace Conference at the Hague, or the lamentations of the Uitlanders over Boer brutality.

### **The Responsibility of Lord Roberts.**

But these excesses are not to be wondered at when every principle of civilised War has been thrown to the winds by those responsible for the conduct of the campaign. I do not pretend that War can be made with buttons on the foils, but I do believe that the

principles laid down in Lord Roberts's proclamations have been unwise, ineffective, and cruel; and that they will leave bitter memories to perpetuate the hatred of races, and to breed up in years to come new generations whose only dream will be to reverse the results of this War. I do not believe that Lord Roberts, who is naturally gentle and humane, is responsible in more than name; his time has been entirely taken up in directing the manœuvres of his troops; he has naturally left in other hands the direction of these affairs.

### The Effect of His First Proclamation.

One of the first proclamations issued after our armies had established themselves in a portion of the Free State announced that any fighting men willing to lay down their arms, and take an oath of neutrality, would be allowed to return to their farms. This seemed to many at first sight to be an eminently conciliatory measure, and possibly, to a certain extent, it was meant as such. If, indeed, it had been applied to those parts of the Cape Colony which had been reconquered after rebellion against the British Government, it would undoubtedly have been an act of clemency and wisdom, worthy of all praise. But it was applied to the fighting men of an independent country, which was still unsubdued, and of which our armies occupied only a small part. In this case, so far from being an act of clemency, it was an attempt to seduce the soldiers of the enemy from their allegiance; it could therefore hardly be expected that the Boer Government would do otherwise than repudiate such an arrangement, and treat the men, not as prisoners of War on parole, but as deserters. That is undoubtedly the course we should have pursued in like circumstances. How rarely we apply to an opponent the rules which govern our own conduct!

### How the Oath of Neutrality Worked.

But it is only when we investigate the actual facts that we see how unreasonable were our pretensions, and what grievous hardship the attempt inflicted on those whom we pretended to benefit.

A Boer—perhaps a boy of nineteen, or an old worn-out man—seduced by our offers, deserts his own army and goes back to his farm; he is therefrom marched into a crowded court, guarded by soldiers. A book is put into his hand, and an oath of neutrality, of which he does not understand one half, hastily read over to him. All he really knows is that if he does not immediately comply, he will be deported to some country across the seas, a punishment of which he is in mortal terror; some are not sure that they will not be shot. Naturally he accepts the situation and does what he is told. He then returns to his farm and lives quietly for a while. But after a time the British troops march away and a Boer commando takes their place; he is informed that his oath is not a valid one, and that he must rejoin his own army. If he hesitates he is called a traitor and forced to obey orders. Remember, this is exactly what we should do in like case with our own soldiers; for we do not admit the right of soldiers to give their paroles except through a commissioned officer. A month later, the troops return and find only women and children in the house; a Kaffir informs the officer that the owner, after taking the oath, has been fighting again. By Lord Roberts' proclamation he becomes liable to suffer death when caught, and meanwhile, on the bare word of the Kaffir, the stock and every moveablething on the farm is ruthlessly swept away, and the women and children are left to starve. If by chance an old rifle is found on the premises, it is considered an additional crime, and in all probability the house is forthwith burnt. That depends somewhat on the temper of the men and the humanity, more or less, of the officer; if it happens to be a Colonial corps, the fate of the home is settled.

### How a General Rewarded his Hostess.

There is a case in my mind at the present moment, the meanness of which makes it more degrading than the cruelty of others. Mrs. Wolmerans, the wife of a gentleman of independent means, living about fifteen miles from Pretoria, gave up a portion of her house to an English general and his staff who were encamped in the neigh-

bourhood. A native confided to one of our waggon drivers that one of Mrs. Wolmerans' sons had been with a commando after having taken the oath; and also that there was a rifle and money buried in one of the rooms. After the family had gone to bed the general and staff officers proceeded to dig up the floor, and there found £14,000 in money and valuables. The next morning the boy was accused of having broken his promise; he admitted to having been to see his brother in Natal during the siege of Ladysmith, but denied that he had been fighting. However, the money was confiscated, and the lady has cause to regret her hospitality.

The fact is that we over-reached ourselves in trying to be too clever; we attempted to bribe an enemy into submission before he was defeated, and to disarm him without the trouble of keeping him as a prisoner. We even denied him protection from the just indignation of his own people. When the policy failed—as fail it must—we revenged ourselves, not only on the man himself, but on his wife and his children.

### **Reprisals for Cutting Railways.**

One of the most unjust of all the proclamations, and the one that has probably inflicted the greatest amount of suffering on innocent people, is that concerning the cutting of railways. It was to this effect:—

1. The principal residents of the towns and districts are to be held jointly and severally responsible for the amount of damage done in their district.
2. Heavy fines are to be inflicted, and the receipts for all goods taken by the troops to be cancelled.
3. The principal residents may be forced to travel on the trains.
4. The houses and farms in the vicinity of the places where the damage is done are to be destroyed, and the residents in the neighbourhood dealt with according to martial law.

### **Not Justified by Precedent.**

It will doubtless be urged in defence of this proclamation that the Germans in France acted in a similar way, but this is very

far from being the fact. The Germans did indeed inflict, or threaten to inflict, some of these punishments on persons who cut the railway lines used by them, but the country on each side was wholly in their possession, and no part of the French armies were maintained in the neighbourhood. Damage, therefore, could only be done secretly and at night by individual peasants living in the vicinity. The German army never dreamed of burning houses on account of their communications being cut by regiments or corps holding their own in the field, and over whom the residents could have no possible control. The rule as applied by the Germans is as necessary as the maintenance of law and order in the occupied country. But when applied to the case of a hostile army holding a position for weeks within a few miles of the railway, and marching under arms, often with artillery, to destroy the line, it becomes merely an excuse for savage revenge and wilful destruction of property.

### **Its Inherent Injustice.**

During the month of August, the Boers were always under arms north of the railway from Pretoria to Middleburg, and no part of that country was under our control or permanently occupied by our troops; I do not think there was a single soldier stationed a mile north of the line. The Boer commandos, consisting sometimes of foreigners, often of men from remote districts, constantly advanced to their front, and breaking easily through our scattered forces, destroyed the railway. There was not the least reason to suspect any connivance on the part of the inhabitants; generally there was not a man in the district; at one time the women and children were thirty miles off in Pretoria by order of the Government. Indeed no such plea was put forward, but as soon as the Boers retired all the houses in the neighbourhood were burnt, and their inhabitants rendered homeless; a cruel and cowardly revenge, as it appears to me. On August 7 two trains from Pretoria were attacked beyond Elands River by a party so strong that a company of infantry, a squadron of cavalry, two guns and a body of Yeomanry were required to keep them in check. When they

retired four farms were burnt; on the same day Daniel Erasmus's farm was burnt near Elands River Station. This is but an example of what is going on all over the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, or Colony, as it is now called.

### **Gloating Over the Burning of Farms.**

I heard an officer of Yeomanry—an English gentleman!—say that he had had the satisfaction of burning twenty-two farms near Bronkhurst Spruit station. Two and a-half centuries ago Cromwell might have said that he had punished the enemies of the Lord, but even he would have regarded it as an unfortunate necessity, and would certainly not have gloated over the misery and wretchedness entailed by such acts.

### **Cruel and Cowardly Revenge.**

General De Wet, with commandos of several thousand men, held large districts, probably a quarter of the whole area of the country, under his absolute control; these commandos were not merely marauding parties, but regularly organised armies with large numbers of cannon and hundreds of waggons. On various occasions he marched into districts held by us, captured garrisons of five or six hundred men each, and took possession of the railway. In most cases, he moved rapidly from a long distance, sometimes a hundred miles, before making his attack. How could it be maintained that families living in isolated farms, often without news of the War for weeks or months at a time, were responsible for these incursions? How could these poor families accomplish what Lord Roberts with 200,000 men, by a most elaborate and well-organised intelligence department, with hundreds of well-paid spies all over the country, so signally failed to effect? If they had attempted it they would have met with short shrift from their compatriots in arms. But the English generals found it easier to avenge defeat by burning houses than to capture De Wet. Not only are such actions cruel and unjust, but they are useless. Let us see what occurred on the Middleburg line. When it was first cut five farms were

burnt; two or three days after a train was attacked near the same place and some men and horses shot. Thereupon several more farms were burnt. Again and again the line was torn up by armed parties marching from the Boer lines, which were only five or six miles off, till at last there were no more farmhouses to burn, and the Boers continued to cut the line with impunity, till our Army was brought up to defend it, and the enemy were finally driven from their positions.

### The Result.

Meanwhile the owners have become reckless men, knowing that when the War ends they and their families will be homeless and starving beggars, and that Peace will have for them greater terrors than War. After all this destruction the line has been cut daily in the month of September.

General De Wet, after his house had been burnt by the English, wrote to General Kriem at Kroonstad:—"My house cost me £700 to build; its destruction will cost the English taxpayers two millions." He has already more than verified his threat, and the lives of hundreds of English soldiers have been added to the account.

### An Official Admission.

Lest my facts be doubted by those who are reluctant to believe that a civilised nation, and one which has always assumed an air of superior enlightenment and humanity towards all other nations of the world, has acted in this way, I quote an extract from *The Bloemfontein Post*, which is the official organ of the Government; and, indeed, the only newspaper allowed to be published in either State:—

*Bloemfontein Post*, Tuesday, August 28, 1900.

AN IMPUDENT MESSAGE FROM OATH BREAKERS PROMPTLY IGNORED:  
FARM HOUSES BURNED.

Krugersdorp, Tuesday (Reuter). Yesterday Commandant Van Zijl sent a white flag protesting against the burning of

farms and the bringing of women and children here as against the usages of civilised warfare.

Van Zijl being one of the men who took the oath of neutrality, and all the farms burnt being those of men who, after being neutralised, have rejoined the commandos, no answer was sent to this impudent message, women who brought the flag being informed that General Barton declined to consider communications of this sort from an outlaw, a man who had broken his oath.

The farmhouse of a man or commando was burnt. The women and children were brought here for shelter and food, and are being well looked after.

It does not even appear that the owner of the last mentioned house was what is called an oath breaker; he seems to have been merely fighting for his country, while his wife and children remained at home; and for this great crime his house was burnt. Did General Barton consider what would happen to these women and children when he marched away from Krugersdorp, or when Peace is proclaimed?

### The Boers not Barbarians.

It has been the excuse of English soldiers in Africa and Asia that the rules of War cannot be observed with barbarians; and that it is necessary to burn villages in order to impress the natives with respect for their conquerors. As these villages consist generally of a mere collection of huts which can be rebuilt in a few days, there is some justification for the plea. But against what class of people are we fighting in South Africa? I have this moment put down *Blackwood's Magazine* for August, in which Captain Haldane describes his treatment while a prisoner of War:—

I have the most vivid and lasting recollection of the attention and kindness which this old Dutch farmer (Davel) lavished upon us. Throughout the journey to the Boer metropolis we met with nothing but the greatest consideration; for this old commander not only got us of the best he could—and at that time the Boer commissariat arrangements were in their infancy—but insisted on lending us some of his blankets, provided us with candles, and with his own hands brought us coffee on the



following morning. He presented Churchill with a blanket, and we felt really sorry to leave his camp. . . . General Joubert's nephew called at Davel's tent and pressed on us the contents of their cigarette-cases.

A hundred instances might be given of such gentle treatment to prisoners, and the Boer kindness to wounded men is acknowledged by all who have fallen into their hands.

### How We Return Evil for Good.

Alas! that such generosity has been so sadly misapplied; no sooner had the English troops begun to obtain an ascendancy than the houses of these very men were given over to the flames. Poor Davel's house, like hundreds of others, is now, in all probability, a blackened ruin, and his wife and children outcasts in the world; so much for British gratitude and chivalry!

So it is that an army licensed to burn and plunder goes always from bad to worse; the most extreme interpretations are now put upon the oath of neutrality.

### Lord Kitchener's Proclamation.

The Chief of the Staff, Lord Kitchener, has issued orders that a father's promise not to fight any more is to be held to include all his sons, whether they have ever surrendered or not:—

In order to ensure public security in the country, it is considered advisable that mobile columns should act in certain districts, with the object of putting down any open rebellion, of removing all houses and forage, and of collecting cattle and live stock belonging to all those who, after laying down their arms and taking the oath of neutrality, have again gone on commando, or whose sons may have gone on commando.

So that a poor old man who, wearied of fighting, has given up his arms and trusted to Lord Roberts's proclamation that he will be allowed to remain in possession of his farm and stock, is now plundered of all he possessed on the plea that one of his sons is bravely fighting to the end.

## The Order to Devastate the Country.

Yet wider and still wider the net is being extended so that no man or woman of Dutch blood can now hope for safety, however peaceful or "loyal" they may be:—

While giving protection to loyal inhabitants in his district the general officer commanding will see that the country is so denuded of forage and supplies that no means of subsistence is left for any commando attempting to make incursions.

It is of course impossible to reconcile the first and second clause of this order; the first is evidently meant as a cloak to cover the desolating meaning of the second.

## The Order to Loot.

Again, to quote another of the many destructive orders issued on this subject to the troops:—

If occupants of farms are "disloyal," or have fathers or sons still serving against us, the cattle and stock are to be seized without payment or receipts.

But the ruling powers of the Transvaal are not content with seizing the property of all the inhabitants of the country; the women and children might still keep themselves alive by buying provisions with money saved in former years.

## Making War on Women and Children.

To prevent this an ingenious plan has been devised: the women and children who had been living in Pretoria since the beginning of the War while their relations were fighting have been ordered to leave; some were sent to join the Boer armies, and undergo, with them, all the hardships and exposure of a campaign; others were sent back to their farms, which mostly by this time were bare and desolate. Where the roofs were still on, the furniture had been swept away by Kaffirs or soldiers; they found neither tables nor chairs, nor even a bed to lie on; only the bare walls

remained. It would have saddened the hardest heart to see, as I did, the arrival of one of these parties at a wayside station; mothers with children in their arms found themselves face to face for the first time with misery and starvation.

### **Driven to Shame by Starvation.**

Some went to Kaffir huts to beg from their former servants; some came to the camps suppliants for food. When women live on the charity of a camp it is needless to describe to what depths of infamy necessity soon reduces them. Others of the better class, wives of rich farmers, had money, and left Pretoria, confident of living without serious privation till their husbands or fathers returned; but they had yet to count with the Military Governor of Pretoria, and yet another stroke of misfortune awaited them. An order was issued forbidding them to leave their farms without passes, and passes to Pretoria for food were strictly prohibited. Evidently it is intended to force the men to surrender by starving the women.

I write only what has come under my personal observation, and what cannot be denied by those who have an opportunity of knowing the facts. It is lamentable to think that a War, sanctioned by many Englishmen under the belief that it was being waged in the interests of justice, should be carried on in so inhuman a manner. That we should force the surrender of our enemies by starving their children and degrading their wives and daughters is surely a barbarity that no European nation, except the Turks, would be guilty of at the end of the nineteenth century of the Christian era.

### **The Worst Outrage of All.**

Scenes such as these are painful enough to contemplate, but an even greater depth of sorrow lies below the surface, for which, though we may not have contemplated it, our policy is responsible. It must not be forgotten that the conditions of life in South Africa

are very different from those in Europe. A few scattered white families live in the midst of a vast and barbarous negro population, kept within the bounds of semi-civilised conduct only by stern laws and constant watchfulness. In many of the districts occupied by our troops the former magistrates and police have been withdrawn, and no others have been appointed to take their places. Yet it is to the isolated farm houses in these districts, without a man to protect them, that the women and children have been driven from Pretoria. Their former black servants see in them the representatives of a defeated race, to whom neither obedience nor respect is due; there are no men to restrain or punish, and these wretched white women are subject to the passions and lusts of the natives. In this district two such crimes have been committed on the refugees; one woman's hands were tied behind her back and she was left half dead from ill-treatment. Another escaped from the house during the night and fled till exhausted she lay without clothing, concealed in the bed of a stream. I am credibly informed that such scenes are taking place all over the country; complaints are met with a shrug of the shoulders, and an expression of opinion that the men should return to protect their own women.

I am not one of those who imagine that War will never produce any evils beyond wounds and death, but I am deeply convinced that ruthless destruction of property, and the deliberate exposure of women and children to horrors worse than those of the battle-field, will draw sooner or later the vengeance of God on the perpetrators. An Empire built on such deeds cannot last, and we may well tremble to think that an emissary may soon be selected from among the nations to devastate as an avenging angel the homes of England; to lay low our palaces and burn our houses; and camping among the ruins of our cities bring shame and misery on our wives and daughters. For "Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord."

AN OFFICER IN THE FIELD.