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THE PROSPECT IN SOUTH AFRICA.

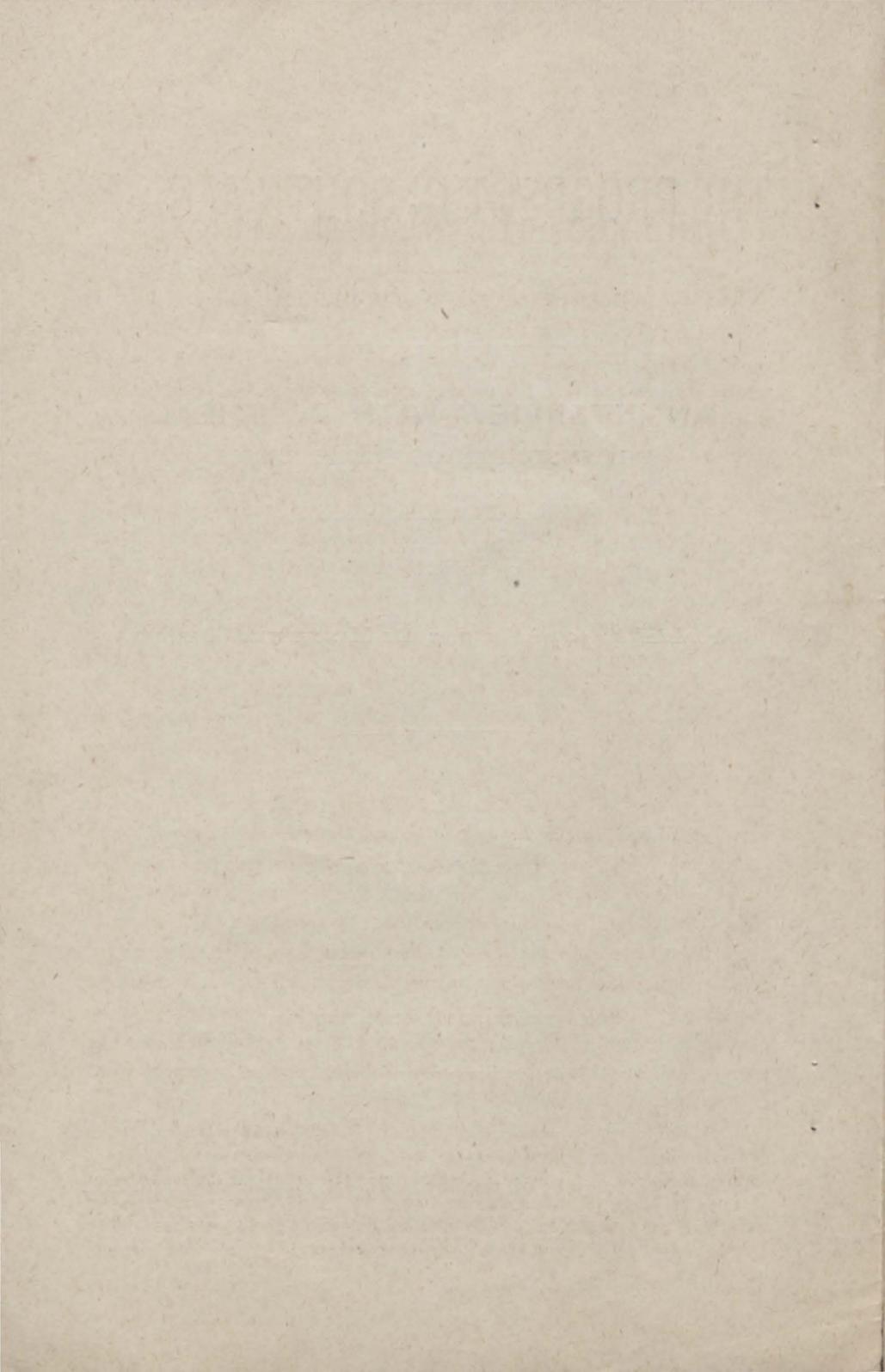
AN INTERVIEW WITH Dr. THEAL,
THE HISTORIAN OF SOUTH AFRICA.

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THE PROSPECT IN SOUTH AFRICA.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. THEAL.

In view of the immense interest which has been excited by South Africa during the last few years, nothing is more remarkable than that the personality of its historian should be so little known in this country. It is no exaggeration whatever to say that the foundations of all that has been well and truly written on South Africa rest on the labours of Dr. G. M. Theal. (His History is in five volumes—he is the author of a long shelfful of other works on South Africa as well,—but the book of his which is most read in Great Britain is the familiar abbreviation of it in the “Story of the Nations” series.) Dr. Theal knows South Africa and its people as no other man can know it. He has long held the office of Historiographer under the Government of the Cape Colony, and has also been for many years Chief Clerk in the Native Affairs Department. From his youth his one passion has been the study of the history of the whites and Kaffirs. For a considerable period he has possessed to a wonderful degree the confidence and affection alike of the Cape Dutch and the natives. Living at Capetown as he has done, and knowing the political world thoroughly, from the High Commissioners downwards, he has not failed to understand also the so-called “English” point of view. By birth a Canadian, by inclination a scholar, by training a Civil servant, by political faith a firm believer in the potentialities of the Empire for good, he is the last man whom anyone in South Africa would dream of charging with taking a local, a superficial, or a prejudiced view of the present situation. In these circumstances I felt myself privileged in meeting Dr. Theal the other day, and in being allowed to report what he thinks about the war :—

“There is no use in speaking other than plainly,” said the Doctor, sitting down on a hard, stiff-backed chair, throwing up his spectacles on his forehead, looking straight into my eyes, and speaking in the grave yet unimpassioned tones of a judge beginning his summing up. “This war is the greatest tragedy of our time. Your people here are living in a fools’ paradise. They do not know what the task is they have taken in hand. The simplest

features of the situation—simple to those who have lived in, to those who understand South Africa—are misunderstood by your press. The papers do not know South Africa, they do not know its history, they do not know the people with whom Great Britain is at war. The other day one journal spoke of the time coming when Briton and Boer would sit down at one table and come to an agreement as a result of which the two races would live in content under British rule. That time will never come. Another journal spoke of the portrait of Paul Kruger being taken from the walls of the Raadzaal and a picture of the Queen being put in its place. You will never see it done. Talk of ‘an agreement to come under our rule,’ rightly or wrongly (it is not necessary to say, I do not say, whether they are right or wrong) the Boers have no confidence in British treaties or in British good faith. ‘England cannot be trusted’ they said before the war; ‘England is utterly faithless. England took our territories, England took our diamond fields; the time will arrive when she will try to take our goldfields too.’”

I recall the fact that the *Times*, in quoting a reference by Dr. Leyds to the country that Great Britain had “stolen” from the Orange Free State, put in “sic” after “stolen.” In the History may be found the pitiful story of the chief Waterboer and his alleged claim to the ground which is now Kimberley diamond mines, and its seizure by us acting on his “rights,” how an English court of law afterwards held that he had no rights, how the Orange Free State thereupon guilelessly asked for restitution of its territory, how President Brand was told that it was necessary for the paramount Power to have the diamond mines, and that he would be given £90,000 in return for what is now worth to the De Beers Company alone £2,000,000 yearly, and how, being a man of peace at the head of a small State, he said, “Well, if it is £90,000 or nothing, I will take the £90,000.”

“THEIR FAITH IN US GONE.”

“Individual Englishmen,” the historian went on, “the Boers like, but their faith in us as a nation is gone. The Raid made the Boers arm in earnest. They thought they saw what was coming. When on the top of the Raid the fatal word ‘suzerainty’ was mentioned I knew at once there would be trouble. ‘That word again!’ said the Boers. ‘England is at her old game. Yes, she will be down upon us this time. She will be revenged for Majuba. We shall have her here again. She will have the gold and our independence, which is our life. It is war to the death.’ When will your people get to see things as they present themselves to Boer, to Afrikander eyes? I know the people you are fighting and what they are capable of doing.”

“A DESERT AND A MOSCOW.”

“Tell me,” I said.

“If this war had taken place before the goldfields had been developed England would have been baulked. Had she entered the Transvaal she would have found its territory a desert, its capital a Moscow. Every farmhouse would have been burned as the Boers fell back; every town and village would have been given to the flames; the cultivated areas would have been

ruined by the destruction of the irrigation dams. As an old Boer mother said to me, 'If the English had come, not my man's, but my own hands would have set fire to this old roof.' The people would have gone forth into the wilderness."

"And now?" I inquired. "Many of the Boers have become rich. If the gold has worked evil in this country, it has worked evil among the Boers too. What will happen in the present war?"

"To start with, understand that if every man and boy who can shoot be put into the field there are not more than 40,000 Boer troops. To these must be added the Uitlanders at the front, in numbers which we do not know, and foreigners. But the total Federal force is, in any case, small when set in array against the tremendous strength of our great Empire. If we keep on, and on, and on, and nothing distracts our attention, and we call forth our immense resources, it seems difficult to believe that a time must not come when England will enter the Transvaal. But if the war be prosecuted therein, we are placing ourselves in the position that the prestige of the whole Empire is involved in the struggle with these farmers. Gold, it is true, has had its corrupting influence in the Transvaal, but only a section of the population can have come under its influence, and a war of defence is a great bracing and consolidating influence. The mass of the people is of the same mind as in the last war.

"AWAY INTO GERMAN TERRITORY."

"Your people are truly ignorant of the actual state of things. The other day one of your papers was commenting on news about confiscation of farms. It did not begin to understand it. It spoke of Boers preparing to leave their farms because the British authorities would confiscate them. What the news really meant was that the Boer authorities had been explaining to their people that if the British came into the Transvaal the owners of the farmhouses must destroy them. The British must find nothing; everything must be burnt. Confiscation! Nothing would be left to confiscate. The British may enter the country. The defending force is small. When a British soldier is killed I am grieved. But to fight and be killed is his trade; he is often a bachelor with no one depending upon him, and the general population is not affected. The Boers marry young. Nearly every Boer killed is the father of a family. When some hundreds have been killed the nation has been sensibly weakened. As Joubert says, 'What if we do kill ten thousand Englishmen, they can bring up another ten thousand to fill their places, but for every thousand we lose we have no more to replace them.' If England enters the Transvaal she enters it over the bodies of its best and worthiest citizens.

GOD AND THE WOMEN.

"Remember that, unlike the condition of things in many a military struggle in Europe, the women are the fiercest advocates of war to the bitter end. For independence the Boer women will send husbands and son after son to fight to the last. They are buoyed up by unconquerable faith in God and the justice of their cause. And the men are what the women have

made them. They have heard at the knees of their mothers, whose history and geography is often largely legendary, the stories, often highly distorted, of how their fathers' fathers' fathers resisted Alva and the might of Spain, and how they grandly laid the fatherland under water and died if it had to be so rather than yield. Then there are told in every home the tales of the voortrekkers and what they suffered from the English before they went out from Egypt into the land to which they were led of the Lord. When the Boers took up arms the spirit of Luther's hymn and the Psalms which supported the Covenanters inspired them. They felt that God was with them, and incident after incident of the battles which have been fought has strengthened their belief. They will not give in."

"People do not understand, Doctor, that South Africa is an intrinsically poor country; as an old friend of mine puts it, a desert with some oases. They confound Boer farming with English farming, and seek to pose you by asking, 'What about irrigation?'"

"Think of the great Karoo, where rain seldom falls, where the roots of small desert shrubs have to go down thirty or forty feet for moisture. Irrigation can do much, but you must remember that when you bring water you have with your moisture insects. The insect difficulty is hardly to be grasped by those who have not been in warm moist countries. I have read somewhere, I think, that the produce of the valley of the Amazon would feed the population of the globe if it were not for the insect hosts that prey upon that region. You bore for water and plant trees, but the cost of coping with the insect pest may be greater than the value of the fruit. You have to set one thing against the other."

THAT GREAT DUTCH CONSPIRACY!

I said to Dr. Theal that he had already dealt with the subject of the "Boer Armaments," how about—but that "Great Anti-British Conspiracy" had entered his mind at the same time as mine, and he interrupted me, saying—

"If any man knows the Dutch people in South Africa I do. My early work alone on those Genealogical Registers of every person who settled in South Africa before 1800 and left descendants—some records being brought down to date—gained me the gratitude and intimacy of great numbers of Dutch people. The letters of thanks which poured in upon me were like nothing I had ever seen before or have seen since. Englishman though I am, wherever I go nothing is too good for me in Dutch houses. It is all over the place that Dr. Theal is there—I am not boasting; it seems well to tell you this—and I am taken by the shoulder and hear a man say, 'You stay at my house; you do not go beyond my door; you are my brother.' I really know the people. I respect them and have gained their respect, and their hearts have been opened, and I have seen into them. I have the confidence of the Dutch-speaking people and their leaders."

"Not only the public but the secret history of our own times in South Africa must be known to you?" I interjected.

"I have known the thoughts and aims of the Dutch through a long period. I say to you, on my word of honour, that I am as sure as I am

sitting here that the design to oust the English from South Africa and set up a great Dutch Republic no more entered the minds of men like Kruger, Steyn, Reitz, Joubert, and Esselen than it has occurred to Premier Laurier to oust the United States from the American continent and make of all North America a great Canadian Dominion. Mr. Reitz, whom the British press has so vilely slandered, is an esteemed friend of mine. I know as a fact that he has been more 'English' as far as English rule in South Africa is concerned than many Englishmen. Englishmen have talked of eliminating the Imperial factor, but not he. I have heard him again and again speak of the advantages derived from the protection of the British fleet. The Boer leaders are not angels, but they are men of common sense. What they have sought, what they seek, is that while they respect British authority outside the Republics, Great Britain shall respect Boer authority inside the Republics. They have never sought more, whatever anybody may say; they have never sought and will not rest content with less."

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NOTE.—For the history of South Africa, Theal's "Story of South Africa," Fisher Unwin, 3s. 9d., is recommended.