

**THE NEW ERA IN SOUTH
AFRICA, WITH AN
EXAMINATION OF THE
CHINESE LABOUR QUESTION**

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The new era in South Africa, with an examination of the Chinese labour question by Violet R. Markham

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VIOLET R. MARKHAM

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THE CHINESE LABOUR QUESTION

BY

VIOLET R. MARKHAM

AUTHOR OF 'SOUTH AFRICA PAST AND PRESENT'

'Alles zal recht kom'

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1904

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THE
NEW ERA IN SOUTH AFRICA

CHAPTER I

THE PRESENT POSITION

IT was on October 11, 1899, that President Kruger flung down that challenge at the feet of Great Britain which closed one era in South Africa. It was on May 31, 1902, after a war the magnitude of which had astonished the whole civilised world, that the new order was inaugurated by the Peace of Vereeniging. Between these two dates lies one of the most memorable struggles of the British race—a struggle the gravity and importance of which future generations alone will be in a position to estimate at their true value. It is unnecessary to linger here over the many events crowded into the troubled, but withal epoch-making, years when, from the four quarters of the globe, men of Anglo-Saxon birth and descent, urged by the sense of a common unity, hurried to South Africa to draw sword in defence of the mother country. With the story of the war itself I am in no way concerned. Its triumphs, its feats of endurance and valour, and, since its record after all is but a human one, those disturbing

blunders and mistakes, not wholly valueless for the lessons they taught and the test they afforded as to the temper of the nation—these things belong to another chapter of South African history. They are written elsewhere, and the knowledge of them has gone abroad throughout the world.

But there is another side to the story left untold—the less familiar victories of peace which followed on the stirring fighting record known to all. A great war is necessarily a period of strain and excitement, and Nature, eternally striving for the average and normal, decrees that a certain measure of reaction should follow such a period. The peace, long deferred, brought with it an overwhelming sense of relief, and, not unnaturally, public interest, so long riveted on South Africa, fell back with a sigh of comfort into the many and varied channels of its normal affairs. Every detail of the war itself was followed with the keenest attention, but with that new and mighty struggle inaugurated by the close of hostilities, a struggle not for the taking of life but the restoration of law and order, the general public has felt less concerned. The soldiers at least started with a clear field. Their failures, when they failed, were due to defects in their own system. But the men of peace, whose task began when that of the army came to an end, were face to face with a very different state of affairs. The chaos of a continent was the one obvious feature revealed by the cessation of hostilities, and the nation, a little weary of the long-drawn-out trials of the war, shrank somewhat from too close an investigation of its character. 'We have seen the thing through, the men on the spot must do the rest.' Such was the tacit attitude, and perhaps at heart there was a general hope

to hear no more of South Africa for a time to come. Like Pharaoh and Sergeant Whatsisname, England gave her blessing to the recent combatants, and literally 'left 'em in the desert making friends.' She mobbed the astonished and wholly unimpressed Boer generals when they visited London, as a further proof of good will, and settled down happily again to her own concerns.

War is dramatic and stirring. Above all, its failures and successes are perfectly obvious. Civil administration, on the other hand, is largely concerned with dull details in no sense picturesque or exciting. Still further, its results are but slowly won and unsensational in character. But the South African Reconstruction constitutes a very remarkable page in our national record, and it is one of which the English have good reason to be proud. The immense difficulties of the task have received very inadequate recognition in this country. The trials of South Africa yet again have come prominently before public notice, and a somewhat petulant impatience makes itself felt that she should linger thus unaccountably on the road to full prosperity. Few people realise what has already been achieved, or the true character of such an achievement in a land where bricks had literally to be made without straw.

That war sweeps away old landmarks, obliterates treaties and conventions, and leaves the victor at its conclusion privileged to write with conquering hand what he pleases on a new page of history—these are well-established truisms. But in Africa, mysterious, baffling, paradoxical Africa, a war was bound, more than in any other land, to follow an abnormal course; a peace, when it came, to present problems of unusual complexity.

During the long struggle between 1889 and 1902 the existing landmarks had been wiped out with a completeness which it perhaps requires some personal acquaintance with the old order of affairs to realise. A country had been laid waste, a Government utterly destroyed, and social, political, and economic life shattered to their foundations. The whole fabric of society had been swept away, and the new power was face to face with a task of reconstruction the magnitude of which at first sight appeared to be little short of superhuman. It might well be asked, could mortal men grapple successfully with so unprecedented a state of affairs; could mortal intelligence restore the blessings of peace and civilisation to so devastated and demoralised a land?

It will be my endeavour in the following pages to give some account of the work of reconstruction in South Africa, and to sketch the outlines of that new State which owes its existence to the incessant toil and unwearied energies of Lord Milner and his able and devoted subordinates. It will rest for a future generation to appreciate at their full value the labours of these men, to whose lot has fallen one of the most complicated and extraordinary tasks in the whole history of the Empire. To say that they have made no mistakes in their unparalleled work would be to claim for them an infallibility their great chief would be the first to repudiate. Can it be seriously suggested that from the ashes of such a struggle the new State, phoenix-like, was to rear itself fair and perfect, without flaw or blemish of any kind in its structure, or without experiencing difficulties and hindrances in its erection? Any such contention seems childish and unreasonable; nevertheless it is tacitly put forward in various quarters.