

What the British Think of Dewet

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It was early in the month of May, 1900, that Christian Dewet first began to impress the force of his character upon the English military mind, writes James Barnes, special correspondent in South Africa of the London Daily Mail. The great army under Lord Roberts was in full sweep of its northward pilgrimage. Along the line of the railway there was little opposition, but to the eastward the dogged and determined Boer fighter was hanging on the rear of General Hamilton's division, engaging him in almost daily actions, harassing transport and rear guard. Somehow he had slipped through from the front, and had adopted the very tactics best suited to the country, and hitherto disdained by the rest of the Boer generals. Botha and his army were fleeing for the Vaal, leaving a trail of dynamite, fire and destruction behind him.

On Thursday, the 24th, which was the queen's birthday, I dined with a young captain in the mounted infantry at Vredfort road. Rations of rum were issued on this day, and at 6 o'clock the bugles of the various divisions were ordered to sound the keynote of D, and, beginning at the right, "God Save the Queen" swept down the sixteen miles of front, sung by nearly 60,000 British throats. Cheers rolled upon cheers; the fires blazed until long after the usual hour for "taps." The Australians held a smoking concert that lasted until nearly midnight. "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" was one of the choruses.

"That's all very well," observed Captain Colville to me, "but I wish we did not have that chap Dewet in our rear. I'll be down here some day chivvying him about the country with a lot of sick horses. You mark my words."

His prophecy was true. He is down there at this present moment, but he is a captain no longer, and has more than a thousand men at his back.

Gradually Dewet's name and his exploits ceased to cause astonishment. He became so serious that he was joked about. A soldier scribbled on the side of a railway carriage leaving Pretoria an addenda to the sign "For Cape Town," reading: "By permission of C. Dewet, traffic manager," and no one got angry. They all laughed appreciatively, which showed that it was no light jest at all.

Dewet became a public personage. I remember seeing in an English comic paper a cartoon representing the elusive Boer general as a will-o'-the-wisp, and that is exactly what he was, and is now. The English intelligence department—which, so far as I could see, was not so intelligent as to threaten the peace of the world—never knew where he was. Sometimes he was reported south of the Vaal, sometimes north of it; he was to the west of the railway, he was to the east of it. He was here consulting with General Botha; he was down south, threatening to punish his elder brother, Piet, if he did not do better fighting. Occasionally somebody got on his track. It was rumored that the scouts had caught sight of him, but, as they had hastened back with the news, they had lost him he was somewhere else.

Success Makes Man Popular.

Now, with the British, who are a sporting people, success at any sort of game makes a man popular. I heard one of the wealthiest men in England, and its youngest duke, make the following remark: "Well," exclaimed he, slapping his thigh, "Dewet is a soldier and a gentleman. I would be proud to be shot by Dewet."

If I have heard one English officer, I have heard a score express the hope that Christian Dewet would come out of the war alive, and I heard a colonel say that if he had the opportunity he would like to give him a big dinner and ask him "how he did it." "You would have to get hold of him first," laughed another officer. "He seems to have a delicacy about leaving his address."

And now for the stories of him that I have heard from Boer sources:

Between Natal Spruit and Standerton, Dewet, while endeavoring to move northward, found his transport headed by a large body of British troops; what did he do but

approach the camp after dark, following the main road, and he drove his wagons straight through the camp! He was hailed, but inquired for some detachment of the British that was farther on, and was allowed to pass. The only objection that was made to his progress was one made by a group of officers dining near the roadway, who did not like the dust his wagon-wheels were making. I have heard this tale denied, but I tell it as it was told to me (I got it from a Boer source), and from what I have myself observed of the callousness of the British officers at times to their immediate surroundings, I dare vouch for its probability. The camps were sur-

rounded at night by floundering transport wagons, lost and inquiring their way to various divisions, and apparently no one able to put them on the right road. It was the easiest thing in the world to ride in and out of an English camp after darkness without attempting any secrecy, and I have done it a score of times. When once inside the lines, one could wander at will, and never have a question asked as to one's business. A shred of khaki, an air of assurance, and an appearance of being English were all that were required. The Boers were informed of everything that went on, and, I firmly believe, of every anticipated movement.

Dewet Had Escaped.

But when the sun rose, what did they find? About forty empty wagons, dragged by a few played-out oxen, had been driven and thumped around in a circle all night! A score of black boys and a half-dozen white men were all the prisoners taken. Dewet had escaped and had managed to take most of his light carts with him along the top of the flanking ridge and had actually rounded the end of the British line and was some twenty miles away, retracing his steps

down upon a heavily guarded pass. Then the noise would change again, as if the direction of march had been altered. The Boers appeared to be confused and it was whispered about that they had lost their way and might stumble upon the outposts at any minute. The advance lines stood with their rifles cocked. Everyone was ready for a midnight attack and supposed at least that the action would begin at the crack of dawn.

When Dewet captured all of the supplies and the huge quantities of ammunition and clothing at Vredfort Weg, he said to his prisoners: "Now we have got more than we want—turn to and help yourselves." And soon Dutch and British were busy looting indiscriminately, taking everything they could get. A burgher and a "Tommy" almost came to blows over the possession of a camera that was being sent to an officer through the post. The mail pouches were all ripped open, and the veldt for miles around was covered with letters and newspapers. Some of these were after-

men squatted about a fire near by, frying some bully beef in a skillet.

His Staff Included in Invitation.

It was General Dewet's headquarters mess and one of the Englishmen at once went over and asked the general if he would not come over and lunch with them. At first he declined, but, upon his staff being included in the invitation he accepted and joined them.

Strange to say, the conversation was not about war, but of farming and the possibilities of irrigation. Later, however, he expressed some of his views to one of his prisoners. He said that he knew the Boers had no chance of being victorious, but he intended to do his best "to make it the most expensive war England ever attempted." He has pretty well fulfilled his threat by this time.

Dewet put little restrictions upon his prisoners, knowing that their unfamiliarity with the country and the fear of getting lost was the greatest safeguard against any attempt to escape. If they had been colonials the case would have been very different, but as it was, they marched along like lambs until they were turned loose on the Natal border, to find their way after weary suffering miles to the British lines.

All these are reasons for Dewet's popularity among his enemies, and they find it hard, I dare say, to believe the stories that are now circulated about his treatment of the peace envoys. Desperation must have changed his character to cause him to act in such a cruel and reckless fashion, forfeiting, if the reports are true, all claims to consideration. But brigand, guerrilla, outlaw, patriot, or what you wish to call him, he is now the backbone of the armed resistance to the British efforts to establish peace. He is the one great stumbling block in the way of final settlement. Although the irreconcilables may consider him a greater leader than Napoleon or Washington, there are thousands of his countrymen who complain that his non-acceptance of the inevitable is causing needless suffering and useless ruin. Some of them, to my certain knowledge, have offered their services toward running him to earth, but so far they have been declined. Woe betide any of these men, for if they should fall into Dewet's hands they would get short shrift. It is said that he has prepared a blacklist, and on it are some of his own relations and an uncle of Louis Botha, the nominal head of the Boer forces in the field. I wonder how he would treat the Boer ladies who have contributed so much to the social life in conquered towns.

Seven Nebraska Governors



Photo by Townsend. William A. Poynter. Charles Dietrich. John M. Thayer. Silas A. Holcomb. Lorenzo Crouse. James E. Boyd. Robert W. Furnas.

Seven Nebraska Governors

toward the Vaal. At least, that is what he was actually doing at the time, but the English did not find it out quickly enough to pursue him. He got almost twenty-four hours' start!

Two nights after, a watchman on guard at a railway crossing, about twelve miles west of Johannesburg, on the Krugersdorp line, was surprised by the appearance of a trooper in a helmet and the uniform of a mounted infantryman, who asked his way to the Florida station. The sentry turned to point down the line, when he was confronted by a cocked revolver.

"Keep quiet," said the supposed Tommy, "and you will not be touched." With that he relieved the astonished man of his rifle, and, in true story-paper fashion, gave three low whistles. Immediately some men appeared from behind a nearby shed, and a few minutes later the head of a column of mounted men, followed by a long train of Cape carts and led horses, came down the road and crossed the railway. It took them almost half an hour to go by. The sentry judged they must have been in the neighborhood of 2,000, with at least eighty carts. When all had passed, the watchman's guardian said to him pleasantly:

Message for the British Commander.

"Your relief will come to you in about an hour. If you stir from where you are until five minutes before that time, you are a dead man, for there is a sure shot with a rifle watching you from the corner of the shed. You can inform your officer that Christian Dewet and his army passed by here at twenty minutes to 1."

The man, whose rifle was taken from him, declares that shortly before the time for the relief came, he heard a man gallop away from the shed nearby. Upon that, he walked into the camp, distant about a mile, and gave the alarm.

The same evening it was reported that

wards gathered up and reached the proper authorities. Strange to say, among them was one of my own, which was tied up carefully and forwarded several weeks later with the following remarks: "Found on the veldt and forwarded to destination."

Captors and Captives Look Alike.

When the Boers marched away it was hard to tell captors from captives, for they all wore brand new winter suits of khaki serge and a sort of pea-jacket of yellowish dun cloth called "British warms." In the meantime, 12,000 troops at Pretoria shivered in the cold, for what he and his prisoners left behind Dewet had burned. It was at Vredfort Weg, by the way, that the station master opened a bottle of champagne when the troops arrived on their northern march, and he and his daughters drank with the officers a toast to the queen and to hopes of a speedy conclusion of the war.

Captain Corbolls, who was in charge of the big transport train which was captured enroute to the relief of the Highland brigade under General MacDonald, told me something of Dewet's personality. According to the captain, he was most kindly and just. He had his men well in hand and they respected and feared him. The officers, as was customary with the British army, possessed in common what was known as a mess-cart, a light wagon or two-wheeled trap, capable of carrying some six or seven hundred pounds, and usually laden with delicacies not down on the ration list. As the Boers were examining their capture, which was some fifty or sixty wagons, they came upon this valuable prize, but upon learning that it belonged to the officers and was their private possession, General Dewet put a guard over it and not a thing was touched. That very day, as the officers were lunching on jam and pickles and pate de fois gras, they observed one or two

Many Fish, Few Mermaids

New York Sun: The colonel occasionally broke forth in language not exactly suited to the drawing room. The colonel was well on in the 50s and had not married. Not that he couldn't, he was wont to explain, but because so few women struck his fancy. One evening the colonel attended a little "at home," and taking the hostess, a very dear friend of his, aside, poured into her ear the story of his rejection by a charming young woman whom he had asked to be his wife. The hostess thought the colonel needed sympathy and, beckoning a charming dinner companion to her, said:

"Colonel — has been telling me that he has not been fortunate in winning the hand of Miss —. Now, I think the colonel ought to remember the old adage: 'There are just as good fish in the sea as ever were caught.'"

"Yes, madam, lots of fish, but there are so few mermaids," interrupted the colonel.

Not What it Was

Detroit Journal: Bitterly the farmer communed with himself, in the darkness, there.

"Coming to New York," he exclaimed! In fair dialect, "is not what it was! I have this day tried to post a letter in a fire alarm box, and have not called out the department! I have given my watch to a dark stranger to keep, only to find that he was a detective in plain clothes! Now I have blown out the gas, but I cannot sleep!"

And as he rose from his restless couch and went forth to pace the deserted streets of the metropolis he quoted Goethe:

"Gib meine Jugend mir zureuck!" Which is to say, being interpreted, there's no fool like an old fool.