

BLACK, WHITE, AND YELLOW.

MORE ABOUT SOUTH AFRICAN SLAVERY. 24 x 105

THE PREMIER'S PREDICAMENT.

Should he be in office "in a few months' time," Mr. Balfour hopes, it would seem, to get rid of the yellow slave question by referring it to those responsible for the government of the Transvaal—for the Constitution will "then be in operation."

Meanwhile he has received from Mr. Herbert Samuel, M.P., a long letter signed by the Bishop of Hereford, Bishop Welldon, Lord Carrington, Lord Coleridge, Lady Aberdeen (on behalf of the Women's Liberal Federation), Mrs. Creighton, Mr. J. Burns, M.P., Mr. T. Burt, M.P., Sir T. Fowell Buxton, Professor Caird, Dr. Clifford, Canon Scott Holland, Dr. Macnamara, M.P., the Rev. F. B. Meyer, Major Seely, M.P., Professor Sidgwick, Mr. J. St. L. Strachey, Mr. C. Trevelyan, M.P., and Mr. H. G. Wells.

The signatories draw the Premier's attention to the following declaration made by him in the House of Commons on the 14th of February last:

"The experiment of using Chinese labour is being most carefully watched by the responsible authorities on the spot, and if it should be found that the immigration of these labourers, from any point of view, was, on the whole, producing a balance of evil, we" (that is, the British Government) "without hesitation should prevent any augmentation of their numbers."

The writers of the letter urge that, by the events which have since occurred in the Transvaal, a balance of evil has been made clearly manifest, and that the time has come, not only for preventing further increase of the numbers of Chinese employed, but for the ending of the experiment.

To this Mr. Balfour has made the following reply:

WANDERING CHINAMEN AND KAFFIR LABOURERS.

10, Downing-street, Whitehall, S.W.,
November 22, 1905.

Dear Mr. Samuel—I have received your letter of the 20th inst., enclosing a memorial in which is expressed the opinion that the time has come not only for preventing further increase of Chinese employed in the Transvaal, but for ending the experiment. In justification of this recommendation you refer to the figures for conviction for desertion and to the number sent to prison for all offences, as given in a Transvaal official return

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I would, however, point out that, in presenting these returns, the Attorney-General, Sir Richard Solomon, stated that "since the importation of these Chinese labourers very few serious crimes had been committed by the labourers up to July 31st, 1905; the returns showed that the number of labourers who had committed offences for which a punishment exceeding six months' imprisonment had been passed was about one-seventh of 1 per cent. of the labour population, and he thought it was only reasonable to conclude from these figures that the large majority of these labourers were law-abiding and easily managed."

With regard to the number of wandering Chinamen, I understand that on the 3rd of September, the day on which the Attorney-General, Sir Richard Solomon, stated that the number of Chinese labourers was 45,500 coolies only 275, or eleven-eightieths of 1 per cent., were found to be absent, and of this number 129 had been reported as found and accounted for within five days. There is nothing in the condition of things revealed by these figures to induce the Government to reverse a policy which was recommended by an overwhelming majority in the Transvaal Legislative Council, with the approval of the great bulk of the white population.

The primary object of that policy was to supply the labour necessary for working the mining and other industries of the Transvaal. You appear to suppose that this argument has lost its force because the number of Kaffir labourers in the mines has increased to the level at which it stood before the war. Even now, however, in spite of this increase, and in spite of the introduction of Chinese coolies, the number of unskilled workmen available has not reached the point at which, in the opinion of the Transvaal Labour Commission, it must stand if the mines were to be worked to the best advantage.

I notice with satisfaction that you give no countenance to the foolish but persistent delusion which assumes the readiness of the white working man to fill the gaps which may occur in the ranks of the black working man. He will do nothing of the kind. And those (if such there be) who preach the doctrine that in the South African mines is to be found an opening for the unskilled labour now asking for employment in this country are, knowingly or unknowingly, acting no better part than that of the demagogues.

The introduction of the Chinese has, indeed, some effect on our home labour market, but it is precisely the opposite of that which it critics suppose. It does not exclude the unskilled white labourer from the mines, for under no circumstances would he consent to be included. But it does increase the demand for the skilled foreman, for his chance of employment depends upon the number of men requiring superintendence; in other words, upon the amount of native and coolie labour available for the principal industries of the country.

I observe that this is not desired in your letter, and that you content yourself with stating that the number of white men engaged has not increased proportionately to the total increase in unskilled labour. This may be true, but the absolute increase of white labour in the Witwatersrand Mines is very large, amounting to over 5,000 since the first arrival of the Chinese, and its estimated remuneration exceeds a million a year. No such increase could possibly have taken place had the mines been obliged to rely on Kaffir labour alone.

IN A FEW MONTHS' TIME.

In a few months' time the Transvaal Constitution will be in operation; and the white population will have an adequate machinery for expressing their views. Should these views be in harmony with the opinion expressed in your letter, I shall gladly agree to abandon what, in the speech from which you quote, I rightly describe as an experiment. Should they, on the other hand, be favourable to the Chinese, I shall be glad to support them.

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Those who regard the terms on which the Chinese workman is engaged as equivalent to slavery are, I admit, in a different position, and cannot be expected to take this view. They are bound to put an end to a system which, in their judgment, is inconsistent with national morality—and to do so whether the Colony be willing or unwilling.

But their task will be a serious one, and it will not be confined to the Transvaal. There is no distinction of principle between the legal status of the indentured Asiatic labourer in that Colony and his condition in other Colonies—nay, there is no distinction between his status and that of the native African miner, except that which is directly due to the greater distance which has to be traversed before he reaches his place of work.

The system of indentured labour, whether coolie or native, must therefore be treated as a whole; and if indeed those critics be right who identify it with slavery, it must ruthlessly be extirpated from every Colony where it has insidiously taken its root. This, however, is not the view of His Majesty's present Government; and I trust that, on the acceptance of official responsibility, it will cease to be the view of any who may hereafter succeed them.—Pray believe me, yours sincerely,

Arthur James Balfour.