

PENANG AFFAIRS.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE BENGAL HURKARU AND CHRONICLE.

SIR,—Exclusive of the attention that has been paid for the last four months to the war between the Malays of Kedah and the enemies and usurpers of their country, the Siamese, the Penang Government has also been lately involved in a dispute with Malays of the opposite coast on the question of Boundary, which has been attended by the most fatal consequences. Upwards of thirty years ago, Province Wellesley was not only ceded by the king of Kedah to the Company, but the extent of its boundaries defined by treaty as follows: "His Majesty agrees to give to the English Company for ever, all that part of the sea coast that is between Kivala Krian and the river side of Kivala Mooda, and measuring inland from the sea-side sixty o-longs, the whole length above mentioned to be measured by people appointed by His Majesty and the Company's people. The English Company are to protect this coast from all enemies, robbers and pirates that may attack it by sea from north or south." This tract of land was accordingly surveyed by the late Mr. Fletcher, Surveyor to Government, and in the plan submitted by him, (the correctness of which has never been disputed) the Company's boundary from north to south with the breadth inland has been clearly laid down. How any difficulty would have arisen on such a subject appears very extraordinary. In my humble opinion I should take it as a bad plea for almost any officer of Government, much less for an Assistant Resident at Province Wellesley and a superintendent of Lands, with upwards of one Thousand Rupees* salary per mensem and a suitable establishment, to urge ignorance in a case like the present. If it has not been deemed necessary as an indispensable point of duty on the part of that authority to make himself acquainted with the limits of the territory over which he is set to govern, no one can reasonably dispute his unfitness for the situation, nor consider a removal from it a hardship. The honor of the Government and the safety of its subjects require that some other person, more industriously inclined, should supply the place of mere indolence and deficiency. What was it but ignorance of the Company's boundaries, or something worse, that caused the unfortunate casualty which occurred on the 7th ultimo at a place called Bukit Kichil, whereby the lives of five men were sacrificed? However much to be lamented, can that catastrophe be viewed in any other manner than the result of a wanton aggression into a foreign territory? It may be asked, by whose authority did they go? Let the Assistant Resident at Province Wellesley reply! The party killed consisted of a Pungulu or constable, three sepoys of the 46th regiment Madras Native Infantry, and a Malay. These were also accompanied by other peons and Malays, who however were wise enough to stand afar off, securing themselves thereby a chance of escape. The object of this expedition to Bukit Kichil is said to have been for the purpose of collecting the Company's revenue from the people of that place, who, it appears, had on all former occasions proved refractory, and refused to pay, alleging (reasonably enough) that as the territory did not belong to the Company but to Tuanko Soliman (the present King of Kedah's brother) they were, as the subjects of the latter, obliged to pay rents to him. This only excited the ire of the constable, who immediately seized two of these unoffending people and manacled them, until they evinced a better disposition (by promising to pay after first consulting with their liege Lord) when they were set free. Soon after this the party encountered the Pungulu of Tuanko Soliman and some of his attendants, and falling into dispute with them on the same subject, the Company's constable commenced the attack by ordering the three sepoys to fire upon the adverse party. This order was very imprudently obeyed; and, before the men could reload and defend themselves, they with the constable were instantly surrounded and cut down. The Malay was killed in his flight in the adjoining jungle. The remainder of the ill-fated party saved themselves by a precipitate and cowardly flight, scampering off to report the circumstance to their superior at Province Wellesley, who, I regret to say, received the intelligence with any thing but the becoming gravity, which the occasion and his situation as magistrate demanded. An eye witness being interrogated on the subject, said, "Tuan tertawa saja." He only laughed.

Province Wellesley, for upwards of twenty years after its cession to the Company, had no Resident, nor was one considered necessary until after the subversion of the power of the king of Kedah by the Siamese, and the general flight of his subjects into the Company's territory for protection. It was to alleviate the misfortune and to supply the wants of these refugees that Mr. Muny was sent over by the Government of Penang, some eight or nine years ago, with authority to apportion out lands to such emigrants as might choose to become permanent settlers. This duty appears to have been performed by that authority in the most judicious and conciliatory manner: emigrants daily flocked in from all quarters attracted to settle under the British Government, administered with so much kindness and humanity. So those disposed to cultivate, Mr. Muny distributed small tracts of land, as well as assisted them with small loans repayable in futuro, and others were encouraged to direct their attention to the rearing of cattle and poultry, to provide for any future contingency in the event of the usual supplies of provisions to Penang from Kedah being impeded or cut off by the Siamese. If the same course of good management had been pursued by his successor in office, that Province would have been at this day a highly cultivated country, in place of being, as it is, a mere jungle (with the exception of here and there a small paddy field or two) with high rents and a discontented population. Instead of the industry of the people being encouraged or stimulated by the imposition of a moderate rent on their lands, their exertions are depressed not only by a most oppressive tax but by the vexatious and despotic mode in which it is levied.

Formerly the tax on land (after due allowance of time to the holder for its clearance and cultivation free of rent) was twenty cents of a dollar per orlong of two hundred & forty feet square. Now the present rate has been raised to treble, in some instances to quintuple that amount; which, taking into consideration the sterility of the soil, unadapted to the growth of any thing but paddy or coconuts, is quite disproportioned either to the produce of the land, or the means of the ryots. The lands, therefore, that were distributed by Mr. Muny at twenty cents per orlong have in general reverted to the Company from the inability of the ryots to pay the more exorbitant demands of the present authority. So miserably distressed and wretched are the poor people there, that the rents and assessments are collected with the greatest difficulty, and in the majority of instances found perfectly impracticable. It is to intimidate such wretchedness that Military force is resorted to! Such a system is not likely to endure, the patience of the Malay will not last for ever.

As if oppression was not sufficient, insult must be superadded by way of aggravation.

When the Chief Resident was at Penang, these poor people presented several petitions complaining of the heavy taxes levied on them, and the impossibility of their obtaining redress of their grievances from the Assistant Resident at Province Wellesley, whose Pungulus and peons plundered them with impunity.

The only reply the Chief Resident deigned to make was to trample these petitions under his feet with an air and dignity peculiarly his own! If such be the justice that is to be measured out to the Malays, there is no great astonishment why a certain authority, dubious of their devotedness and affection, feels it inconvenient, it is said, to move about without a military escort, and to think it but too requisite to have his domicile strongly guarded both day and night.

As an instance, out of a thousand, of the iniquities practised by the native officers, can it be denied that the Pungulu at Penaga (a district of province Wellesley) actually stole nine buffaloes from a native, and that when the owner wished to complain of the outrage, the influence of two young proteges of the Assistant Resident screened the villain from punishment, and the complainant was sent away without being allowed a hearing!! It would be a great satisfaction to both the inhabitants at Penang and at Province Wellesley, if the Supreme Government would institute an inquiry into these matters; and as a means of appeasing the present general discontents, would either moderate or totally abrogate the revenue on lands and the assessments on property.

The villagers have to pay an assessment of thirty cents of a dollar per square foot; for a house in value not worth three rupees, the owner has to pay probably eight to twelve dollars annually to the Company. How can poor fishermen afford this!

I remain, Sir, your most obedient servant,

INVESTIGATOR.

Pulo Boonting, the 22d July, 1831.

P. S. Notwithstanding all the countenance given to the Siamese by the Penang Government, the cowards can make no impression upon the Malays, whose spirits are buoyant and provisions plentiful.